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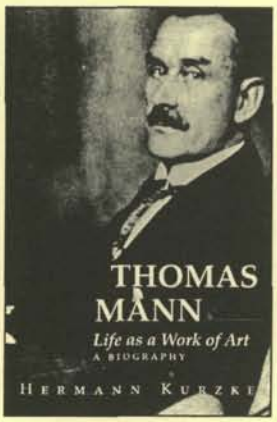

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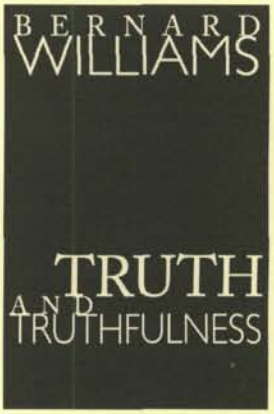

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Early Listening

"Music is a memory bank," wrote Bruce Chatwin. In this issue, two writers draw on musical accounts that have been accruing interest since their childhoods.

Carlo Rotella, the author of "A Distinctly Bluesy Condition" (page 13), heard his first Buddy Guy album when he was thirteen. "Four or five of us, all boys, were sitting around in my friend Paul Fox's room. Gavin Martin put on a record. It was a slow blues. There were several choruses of guitar solos before the lyrics started. You know how befuddled you are when you're thirteen? Well, I was especially dreamy, and the first thirty seconds of hearing Buddy Guy just snapped me into clarity. I thought: Oh. It's possible to do this. It's possible to do something not only this well but this *expressively*."

Rotella lived on Chicago's South Side, five miles from Buddy Guy's club, the Checkerboard Lounge. Within a few weeks he was cadging rides to the Checkerboard from older friends. "No one was carded," he says. "You could go with five dollars, pay two bucks at the door, and buy two drinks. There was a liquor store across the street that was even cheaper. We'd see the set, buy a couple of six-packs during the break, and stand around outside the club soaking up the conversation before we went back inside for another set." He often got home at 3:00 A.M., his head full of songs not about teenage romance and rebellion but, as he puts it, "about problems that adults have: work and adultery and bills."

David Michaelis was nine when he first heard the exquisitely shocking strains of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" drifting from the counselors' lounge at his summer camp. Thirty-five years later, for our Rereading department (page 130), he revisited the album's words, the first complete set of lyrics ever printed on a record cover. "The moment I heard the first line—*It was twenty years ago today*—I felt a transformation in the music that foretold a transformation in me. Up to this point the Beatles had been boys, but now they'd become men, and their songs were pulling me right along with them."

I asked both writers whether they would have written differently if they'd first heard the music as adults. "Writing about music I'd heard then," said Michaelis, "was like looking through a window at something that was still shining and beautiful and clear. If I were writing about music I heard now, there would be no window." Rotella, who has heard Buddy Guy live more than a hundred times since his first exposure, said, "It's the difference between acquiring an enthusiasm and having the enthusiasm present at the creation of *you*."

A. F.

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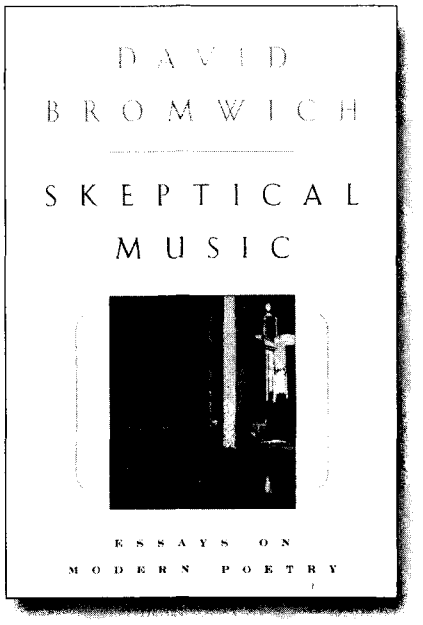

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ESSAYS ON MODERN POETRY

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AT LARGE AND AT SMALL

I Said to Myself

NICHOLSON BAKER

One day I saw a groundhog eating a clover blossom. It chewed it up quickly and then, in the quiet that follows a swallowed mouthful, it lifted its head up and froze, listening for danger. There wasn't any, so it moved forward to the next stalk. Its fur was kind of baggy, but sleek. I looked at its childishly ineffectual paws, and then I remembered that a month earlier I'd seen two big groundhogs sunning themselves in another part of the yard, down by the rhubarb. They'd had tails that looked like the handles of Revere saucepans. "I wonder if this one has a tail that looks like a Revere saucepan, too," I said to myself, waiting for the creature to turn a little so that I could see its hindquarters. In a minute, it did turn, and I was able to verify that the tail was black, whereas the rest of the animal was a light brown, and, yes, it had a curve that looked quite a lot like a saucepan handle, though without the little metal ring at the end.

"Ah, good, that's confirmed," I thought, turning away from the window. Or did I think that? For I hadn't actually said to myself, in an interior whisper, "Ah, good, that's confirmed." Really I'd just made a quick mental nod—not even a grunt, only a sort of pleasant checking-off of the box next to a momentary visual curiosity directed at the groundhog's tail, conjoined with an image of a matte-finish handle in profile. Words had had nothing to do with it. Still, if someone had asked me what had gone through my mind just then, I would have gestured at the window and talked briefly about groundhog anatomy, and then I would probably have translated the mental checking-off moment into spoken English as, "Ah, good," etc.

It was cheating, in a sense, true—but what choice did I have? The gulf between words and thoughts is unbridgeable, and yet we must bridge it constantly. One way writers have developed to circumvent the problem is to report all thinking indirectly. Here is the sort of substitution you can make:

> *Direct:* "I just don't know any more," I thought.
> *Indirect:* I was no longer entirely confident that I knew.

If you're a novelist and working in the third person, the change can play out something like this:

> *Direct:* "That hurts," Ed reflected.
> *Indirect:* Nothing that Ed had ever experienced had prepared him for the anguish of that syringe.

You see? A paraphrase acknowledges itself as close to but not identical with the thing (in this case the thought) that is phrased, and for some writers, a well-formed paraphrase is entirely sufficient.

It's more than movies offer, after all. The poor movie director: What does he have to work with? Things like grimaces and winks and head-tosses of various kinds, and camera angles. A writer can say, "The hope that his aunt would reconsider had died like a summer bluefly within him." The director, on the other hand, must have the actor sit on the

Nicholson Baker's books include *Vox*, *The Mezzanine*, and, most recently, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction in 2001. He writes the SCHOLAR's "At Large and At Small" column each autumn.

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floor and look desolate while the camera moves in—in movie code, the fact that the person is sitting on the floor signals that a low point has been reached, a point so low that even the comfort of a chair is unwelcome. Or a movie will have the despairer suddenly become enraged, which is more filmable: he sweeps some figurines off a shelf and then, after this release, sinks to the floor. Or the hopeless person will bounce a ball expressionlessly against a garage door, or toss acorns into the river: the moviegoer translates this mechanically repeated activity as "the numbness that follows despair." The music helps a lot, too.

How clumsy, how broad, how expensive these cinematographic sign-systems seem, when compared to the dental trays full of pryers and pickers and angled mirrors that are the fiction writer's rightful inheritance. Any mind Tolstoy wants to enter, he enters. It costs him nothing but a drop of ink. In fact, merely by using indirect thought-reportage, Tolstoy can enter two minds at the same time:

> But for all that, as is often the way with men who have chosen different callings, though in discussion each of them might justify the other's career, at heart he despised it. Each believed that the life he himself led was the only real life and the life led by his friend was nothing but an illusion.

All the camera angles in the world couldn't help you here.

And yet Tolstoy wasn't content merely to offer indirect thoughts. He was one of our very best introspectors, alert to uncatalogably fine gradations of moral compromise and motivic ambiguity, and sometimes he wanted us to *overhear* mental states rather than to read secondary paraphrases of them. So he has his characters think, "We shall see," or "Oh dear!" or "Where was I?" or "Can it really be true?" Sometimes their inner voices are quite chatty:

> 'If this is the case,' he said to himself, 'I ought to think it over and make up my mind, and not let myself be carried away like a boy by the impulse of the moment.'

Sometimes they are angrily chatty:

> 'I cannot be made unhappy because a despicable woman has committed a crime. I merely have to find the best way out of the painful situation in which she has placed me. And find it I shall,' he said to himself, his face growing darker and darker.

Did Tolstoy believe that his characters really said this sort of thing to themselves? I can't believe that he believed it, any more than Shakespeare believed that a man makes life-or-death decisions in blank verse, with one hand on his chest and the other held out sideways. I believe that if I were able to tap Tolstoy on the shoulder and ask him why he had written these particular lines this way, he would say to me, "I was trying to record what my characters would have told me if I had been able to tap them on the shoulder and ask them at that instant what they were thinking."

Actually, though, Tolstoy would probably say to me, "I have no patience, amigo, for questions of this nature. By rejecting the Church, you have allowed your soul to rot. Please leave me now to walk barefoot among the birches."

In any event, Tolstoy is, fortunately, not the only writer to understand that the reader's bond of sympathy and intimacy with a character must occasionally be reinforced, goosed slightly, by a directly quoted brain-whisper. The character must sometimes say things that only we, and nobody else in the book, can hear.

It doesn't have to happen much. Children's writers have always done it well (take a look, for example, at some of Toad of Toad Hall's internal mutterings), and there is pedagogy at work here, perhaps. Quoting thoughts is an efficient way of teaching how to match spoken language with voiceless states of mind—it's like holding up an apple you can't see and saying "apple." Masters of the ghost story, too, rely on the technique to create a quick shudder, as in this from M. R. James:

> 'What should I do now,' he thought, 'if I looked back and caught sight of a black figure sharply defined against the yellow sky, and saw that it had horns and wings?'

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Or this one from Edith Wharton:

> The room itself might have been full of secrets. They seemed to be piling themselves up, as evening fell, like the layers and layers of velvet shadow dropping from the low ceiling, the rows of books, the smoke-blurred sculpture of the hearth.
>
> "Why, of course—the house is haunted!" she reflected.

Now, notice the punctuation in these passages. *They have quotation marks.* These writers evidently felt that, as with real speech, psychic speech needs visible delimiters to set it off from its surroundings. (In the original Russian, Tolstoy used little «French-style brackets,» but the effect of enclosure is the same.) I have spent some hours recently foraging around in paperbacks, and I can report that practically all the big-name writers through 1930 or so—people, I mean, like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Theodore Dreiser, Joseph Conrad, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis—felt the need to put their characters' thoughts within quotes, either single or double, from time to time.

Writers don't do this now. I asked a copy editor friend how the literary world was punctuating its thoughts these days, and he polled some copy editor friends of his. One wrote back: "I haven't seen quotation marks on thoughts in at least five years."

Why did they die out? Joyce and Faulkner, of course: Those eager reformers led us astray. *Ulysses* has innumerable blobs of transcribed thought, but the quotation marks themselves are everywhere lacking:

> Mr Bloom moved forward raising his troubled eyes. Think no more about that. After one. Timeball on the ballast office is down. Dunsink time. Fascinating little book that is of sir Robert Ball's Parallax. I never exactly understood. There's a priest. Could ask him. Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax.

Not only are the quotation marks gone, but there is no obliging tag such as "he reflected" or "he said to himself" inserted after the first interior sentence to help us keep track of where we are. "Oh, good," said Joyce's readers to themselves, brushing the cracker crumbs from their laps, "now all the artificial barriers can come down, and interior and exterior reality can ooze together into one sense-perceptual fondue."

But, again, did Mr. Bloom think, "There's a priest," followed by, "Could ask him"? I can't imagine that he did. Mr. Bloom's eye lighted on a figure in clerical dress—a visual, not verbal, mind-event—and the possibility of asking the figure a question briefly arose and was dismissed within him. That's what really happened, and Joyce knew it, the rascal. He was doing just what traditional novelists did: hanging out raw, wet harvestings of visual and emotive protoplasm to dry on grammatical clotheslines, the only difference being that there is in *Ulysses* a great deal more dried protoplasm. Bloom's thought-residues are (once you get into the swing of the book) sometimes startling and beautiful, but they aren't any less artificial than when, say, M. R. James has a character mentally scope out, within quotes, his evening plans. Here's how M. R. James did it:

> 'I might walk home tonight along the beach,' he reflected—'yes, and take a look—there will be light enough for that—at the ruins of which Disney was talking.'

Joyce would, I bet, twist off the knobs of the quotation marks and render the passage something like this:

> The beach way. Might walk home tonight. Disney said the ruins? Templars' preceptory. Knights in Jerusalem, looters, really. Cries of the maidens. Having their way. Light enough for that.

And then, while the artistic classes were still chewing this development over, Faulkner began an aggressive program of italicizing. Here's a snip from *Light in August*:

> That was two years ago, two years behind them now, thinking *Perhaps that is where outrage lies. Perhaps I believe that I have been tricked, fooled.*

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What was a modernist to do? There was simply no way to reconcile Joyce's austere depunctuation with the booming self-importance of Faulkner's typography. Both were extremely exciting, and yet they pointed in opposite directions. Thought-transcription was thrown into a state of darkness and uncertainty from which it has not yet recovered. Some, like Bellow and Drabble, went naked—

> I too have done my share of social climbing, he thought, with hauteur to spare, defying the Wasps. (*Herzog*)

> To the gallows I go, she said to herself, and had another large drink. (*The Realms of Gold*)

—while the post-Faulknerians, such as Tom Clancy, reached for italics, which are punchier:

> Julio stood and shouldered his weapon. There was a slight but annoying tinkle from the metal parts as he did so—the ammo belt, Ding thought. *Have to keep that in mind.*

Sometimes, though, those urgent forward diagonals turned out to have a little too much punch, forcing the reader to interpret a shy, fleeting brain-state as if it were uttered in a hoarse whisper:

> He fumbled his latchkey into its slot, thinking: *Now she'll ask me why I lock my door and I'll mumble and stumble around, looking for an answer, and seem like a fool.*

In roman type, within quotation marks, this thought-quote could easily be Tolstoy; in italics, however, it is from Stephen King's *The Stand*, page 516.

I suppose there's no correct method, but I sometimes wish that the old ways would come back. I miss the clarity, the lack of fuss, the innocence. So here's what I propose. Let's use quotation marks for spoken dialogue, as usual, and—once in a while, *if* it makes sense, *not* excessively—let's try using them for interior speech as well. Those who feel ambitious could experiment with double quotes for dialogue and single quotes for thought, since part of the problem is that double quotes sometimes look too heavy to fence off delicate interior states. But that distinction isn't necessary and it may actually cause further confusion—so, no, skip that. If the words in the thought really do have force and punch, by all means use italics, but if they don't, don't. And if you would prefer to use only indirect thought-discourse, fine. Just don't utterly rule out the blameless embrasure of those curlies. Here's something I came across in *Winnie-the-Pooh*:

> Sometimes he thought sadly to himself, "Why?" and sometimes he thought, "Wherefore?" and sometimes he thought, "Inasmuch as which?"—and sometimes he didn't know what he was thinking about.

I'm with Eeyore.

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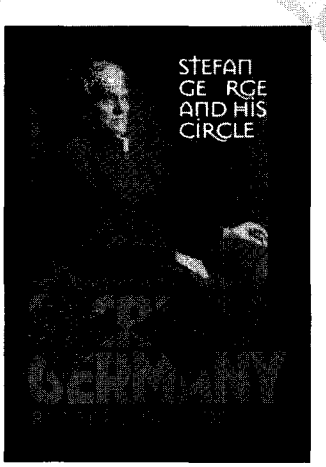

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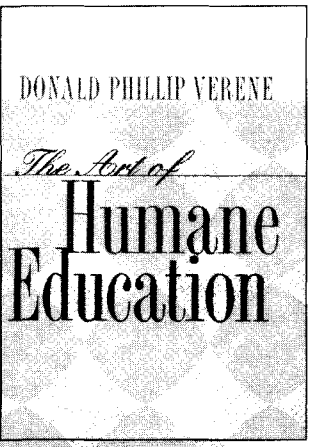

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Thence to Westminster to my barber, to have my periwig he lately made me cleansed of its nits; which vexed me cruelly, that he should have put such a thing in my hands.

—SAMUEL PEPYS,
Diary, *July 18, 1662*

Among the insected animals, about the most industrious, and to be compared with all the other animals, are the ant kind and the bee kind, also anthrines and wasps and virtually all that are akin to them. Among the spiders too the smoother are the leanest and the most ingenious over their living. Now the working of the ants is on the surface for all to see, and how they all go on one path and put aside and store their food; for they work at night too when the moon is full.

—ARISTOTLE (384-322 B.C.),
Historia Animalium, *XXXVIII, Book VIII (IX)*

COMMONPLACE BOOK

Bugs

COLLECTED BY
ANDRÉ BERNARD

What I mean is that for someone who grew up in the Midwest, part of the pleasure of foreign travel is knowing that you're in a place where there aren't any chiggers. When someone from, say, Sedalia, Missouri, is on the top of the Eiffel Tower, looking out over the whole City of Light, what runs through his mind is, "Even if they were around here, they couldn't get this high."

—CALVIN TRILLIN,
Too Soon to Tell, *1995*

In the summer hosts of big red-and-yellow grasshoppers, with heads shaped like horses', will descend and eat holes in all the softer leaves. Walkingsticks fly like boomerangs. Shining brown leaf-shaped palmetto bugs scurry like cockroaches. Spiders like tiny crabs hang in stout webs.

—MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS,
The Everglades, *1947*

Yesterday I observed a great number of insects like grains of fine sand moving on my boxes. On examination with a glass, there were four species apparent; one of green and gold prinning its wings, which glanced in the sun with metallic lustre, another clear as a mite, a third of vermilion color, and a fourth black. These are probably the insects which consume the seeds of every plant that grows. The Mohorongwe is often covered with fine eggs of such little scavengers. There are great numbers of distillers. The saliva-looking mass abound on the grass, and the insects themselves, generally beautifully green with transparent wings, come spring[ing] to the lamp at night. A species of butterfly with perpendicular wings lights [on] our clothes, and applying a long flexible proboscis to them squirts from its tail drops of water, as if to melt anything soluble for food.

—DAVID LIVINGSTON,
African Journals,
February 14, 1856

Hawkesworth's compilation of the voyages to the South Sea being mentioned;—JOHNSON. "Sir, if you talk of it as a subject of commerce, it will be gainful; if as a book that is to increase human knowledge, I believe there will not be much of that. Hawkesworth can tell only what the voyagers have told him; and they have found very little, only one new animal, I think." BOSWELL. "But many insects, Sir." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, as to insects, Ray reckons of British insects twenty thousand species. They might have staid at home and discovered enough in that way."

—JAMES BOSWELL,
The Life of Samuel Johnson, *1791*

As the corpse went past the flies left the restaurant table in a cloud and rushed after it, but they came back a few minutes later.

—GEORGE ORWELL,
"Marrakech," 1939

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That active little fly, now an unbidden guest at your table, whose delicate palate selects your choicest viands, while extending his proboscis to the margin of a drop of wine, and then gaily flying to take a more solid repast from a pear or peach; now gambolling with his comrades in the air, now gracefully currying his furled wings with his taper feet, was but the other day a disgusting grub, without wings, without legs, without eyes, wallowing, well pleased, in the midst of a mass of excrement.

—W. KIRBY AND W. SPENCE,
An Introduction to Entomology, *1815-28*

The male [scorpion] initiates a series of grasping and kneading movements with his chelicerae (minor claws), then grasps the female's chela (major claw) with his own and performs the celebrated *promenade à deux*, a reciprocated and symmetrical "dance," pretty as anything you'll see at Arthur Murray's. These scorpions do not inseminate females directly by inserting a penis, but rather deposit a spermatophore (a packet of sperm) that the female must then place into her body. Thus, the male leads the female in the *promenade* until he finds an appropriate spot. He deposits the spermatophore, usually on a stick or twig, then bats or even stings her, disengages, and runs for his life.

—STEPHEN JAY GOULD,
The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections
in Natural History, *1985*

Robbin calls bracken "the Lucrezia Borgia of the fern world," for it packs a series of horrors for the insects that eat it. The young fronds release hydrogen cyanide as soon as the insect's mandible tears into them, and if this does not kill or deter the bug, a much crueler poison lies in store. Brackens, more than any other plant, are loaded with hormones called ecdysones, and when these are ingested by insects, they cause uncontrollable moulting. In effect, as Robbin puts it, the insect has eaten its last supper.

—OLIVER SACKS,
Oaxaca Journal, *2002*

In an abandoned barn pulled half down by honeysuckle vines, mud daubers built their terrible castles, tube on tube of wasp-brick. Because I was allergic, my mama said, one sting could kill me. I grew to dread all insects—June bugs, yellowjackets, bumblebees, dragonflies alike.

—THOMAS MCNAMEE,
The Return of the Wolf to Yellowstone, *1998*

The salmonflies—*Pteronarcys californica*—plump juicy insects two inches long with great gauzy wings—are everywhere. Their nymphal shucks litter the rocks on shore. Adults hang like clusters of grapes in the willows reaching over the bank, and when not making love in the bushes, where in sheer buggy ecstasy they sometimes tumble off the couch into the maws of a Peeping Tom trout, they fly awkwardly above the river by the thousands. Females dapple the water surface to shed their eggs, and the trout are waiting for them. Caught by a gust of wind, other salmonflies are dashed to the water. These lumbering flies appear to have no sense of fear or self-preservation.

—ERIC LEISER and ROBERT H. BOYLE,
Stoneflies for the Angler, *1982*

No one is more thoughtless than a lemming, more deceitful than a cat, more slobbering than a dog in August, more smelly than a piglet, more hysterical than a horse, more idiotic than a moth, more slimy than a snail, more poisonous than a viper, less imaginative than an ant, and less musically creative than a nightingale. Simply put, we must love—or, if that is downright impossible, at least respect—these and other animals for what they are.

—UMBERTO ECO,
"How to Speak of Animals," 1987

I did go to the Swan; and then sent for Jervas my old periwig-maker and he did bring me a periwig; but it was full of nits, so as I was troubled to see it (it being his old fault) and did send him away to make it clean . . .

—SAMUEL PEPYS,
Diary, *March 27, 1667*

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A Distinctly Bluesy Condition

CARLO ROTELLA

Chicago blues is the music of an industrial city, and it has an industrial sense about it. It's also a cold city, and Chicago blues has a sense of fighting the cold, and it's an angry city, and the Chicago blues has Chicago's anger in it.

—Bruce Iglauer, founder of Alligator Records

And, to get to the bottom of it, everything I sing I haven't experienced it. You know, people look at a blues player sing, "I worked five long years in a steel mill." I never been in a steel mill. But they look at me and they say, "Wow, man, you must have been catching hell *in that steel mill. . . ."*

—Buddy Guy

Buddy Guy was playing slow blues at the Trump Marina casino in Atlantic City. The second song in a Buddy Guy set is almost always a slow blues. This time he was doing one of the core tunes of his repertoire, Eddie Boyd's "Five Long Years," which begins, "If you ever been mistreated, well you know just what I'm talking about." This early in the set, before guitar-induced brain fatigue had set in, the crowd responded vigorously to every line and every guitar fill. The majority of those present, casino patrons with no particular investment in Guy, seemed to regard his performance as a choice service provided by The Donald. Many of them had been comped for tickets by the casino. They had not been away from the gambling tables and machines for very long yet, and they were in an expansive mood. They did not even seem to mind that the first verse's kicker—"I worked five long years for one woman, and she had the nerve to put me out"—committed the double gaucherie of mentioning hard work and domestic troubles at the Trump Marina. The distractive poetics of casino gambling is supposed to erase such prosaic matters from one's

Carlo Rotella is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. This essay is adapted from *Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt,* which will be published by the University of California Press in October. His essay "Cut Time" was the co-winner of the 2000 American Scholar Best Essay Award.

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consciousness. Mixed in with casino tourists and committed gamblers on break were people who were there primarily to hear Guy, blues fans who had penetrated layers of Trumpismo to get to the music. They were pleased to find their man in fine voice and playing in New Jersey, near their suburban homes, rather than in New York or Philadelphia. Everybody was in a good mood, Guy included. He was almost sixty-two years old, trim and prosperous; he had a new CD, *Heavy Love*, on the shelves and a long-term recording deal with Silvertone; and he owned Buddy Guy's Legends, a thriving blues club in downtown Chicago. He wore crisp denim overalls (with a certain cosmopolitan irony) and played a customized black Buddy Guy model Fender Stratocaster guitar with white polka dots all over it.

The composer of "Five Long Years," pianist Eddie Boyd, died in 1994, but Buddy Guy is taking good care of his song. Guy sings the hell out of "Five Long Years," making it the most powerful song of his set on the nights he performs it. He turns Boyd's tight midtempo tale into a showstopping slow blues, sometimes singing its three-verse narrative twice as he works through the song's shadings of sound and meaning. Guy has just the voice for singing "Five Long Years." His lower register has a dark pulse suited to brooding or threatening; in his midrange he eagerly bends and jumps notes as the spirit moves him; and when his voice sails into its piercing upper register, it acquires an unsettling conviction that manages to be aggrieved and joyful at the same time. It is a voice that sounds as if it started out to be churchy but got mixed up with a faster crowd.

He also plays guitar. Guy's playing, as instantly recognizable as his voice, can be shrewdly pent up, but when he lets himself go—which is most of the time—it soars wildly over the top in a torrent of fast, loud, often distorted notes that regain their purity when sustained on a bent string pinned to the fingerboard. He has a strangler's touch, squeezing strings to produce vertiginous dissonances that resolve themselves and pass into dissonance again as he lets up and reapplies the tension. Especially in live performances, he favors a variety of staticky, clangorous tones that evoke a giant turbine's whine, a downed power line whipping back and forth in a thunderstorm, or a thousand horns played in loose unison through a bad long-distance telephone connection. Guy's playing often feels more than a little out of time and out of tune, but never unmusical; he does not rest easily within the confines of a song or a style, instead machining the music into his own jagged diction.

On "Five Long Years," Guy's solo escalated rapidly from a few scattered notes into an unbroken fusillade. Furious runs up and down the guitar's neck, punctuated with the startlingly human-sounding groans he wrenched from the strings, produced a nearly solid, thickly textured block of music that expanded until it filled the room. Members of the audience—those who had known what to expect, as well as those who had been expecting either a younger Muddy Waters or a blacker Eric Clapton—were exchang-

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ing glances: some shocked, some deeply satisfied, some suggesting a headache was on the way. It was as if they were realizing that the drinks were dosed. Some were going to enjoy the trip, some sensed a rough night ahead, everybody felt the strong medicine.

As Guy has admitted over the years, he is anxious to please, to a fault. Extraordinarily sensitive by nature and fixated on bringing joy to an audience at all costs, he fears his listeners will be put off, unmoved, or—to raise the bar higher—thrilled but not quite thrilled enough. He therefore regards a live show as a do-or-die matter of scaling to ecstasy, a more delicate operation than his penchant for exaggerated volumes and guitar-heroic grimaces might lead one to believe. Inevitably, he does not always manage to sustain the balance between establishing a structure and transcending it. Especially in recent years, since he became a minor rock star in addition to being a major figure in the blues, he has tended to sacrifice structure in pursuit of transcendence. As the set develops, one can begin to feel bludgeoned, not so much by the impressive volume of guitar playing (measured in both decibels and notes to the bar) as by the sense that Guy's determination to take us all up one ecstatic peak after another becomes oppressive.

Guy, who reads crowds attentively, is not unaware of the need for solid grounding occasioned by his flights into abstraction. At some point in almost every set, after he has done the slow blues and perhaps two or three other songs, he will gesture at establishing that ground by offering a thumbnail history of the blues in a series of imitations and homages. Guy initiates the set's midgame, bringing the crowd to heel, with a little speech about the importance of recognizing the leading lights of the blues, many of whom have passed and did not receive their due when they were alive. Then he offers a musical genealogy of his style—what he believes his audience knows and ought to know about his blues. When I started going to hear him play live in the late 1970s, he would do Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Jimmy Reed, and perhaps a few notes of Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love" to tease the rock fans in the audience.

At the Trump Marina, a typical late-1990s show, Guy did Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, but he also did Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, and at the end of the show he explained to the crowd that he had forgotten to do Stevie Ray Vaughan, so he played "Cold Shot," too. Guy's place in the world had changed. It was the summer of 1998, and his fifth Silvertone CD had recently arrived in stores. He could reasonably expect to make some money from it, thanks in great part to the rock stars in his musical debt who had helped secure the Silvertone contract, boosting his career. A marketing push had cast Guy as a gray eminence stepping forward to claim long-overdue credit for fathering classic rock. Jonny Lang, a teenage blues-rock phenom whose first major CD had sold a million copies, toured with Guy as a co-headliner. The blues-rock synthesis was much in evidence. One

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could hear Guy's influence in Lang's playing and singing, and Guy demonstrated the reflexive influence on him of Lang's predecessors, a long train of rock guitar heroes who had worshiped and studied Guy in their youth. Guy was not, precisely speaking, doing any of them in the sense that a mimic does someone. Rather, he invoked them. He would call out a name from the pantheon, launch into a recognizable riff, and either perform the song as pure Buddy Guy or cut it off and move to the next one. The audience roared approval for each and all.

Buddy Guy, abstractionist guitar hero, is certainly not today's most classically orthodox exemplar of Chicago blues style—Morris Holt, a no-nonsense fellow who answers to the stage name Magic Slim, probably is—but Guy enjoys the highest commercial and artistic profile in Chicago blues. That disjunction has made his playing a battleground in a public struggle over the state of the music. One side in the struggle, whose most forceful spokesmen are the critic Bill Dahl and the harmonica player Billy Branch, believes Chicago blues has suffered an extended artistic crisis since its golden age in the 1950s. These prophets of decline see a once-vital genre reduced to a hot-licks subset of guitar rock, a new Dixieland (with "Sweet Home Chicago" in the role of "When the Saints Come Marching In") designed to satisfy tourists seeking the rock aesthetic's equivalent of the source of the Nile. Stasis and then the genre's slow death ensue. Dahl told me, "I think the writing of the Chicago scene's artistic obituary is not far down the road," and he has been publishing rough drafts of that obituary for years. The other side—the boosters, a sort of Benetton universalist coalition led by, among others, Buddy Guy and Lois Weisberg, Chicago's commissioner of cultural affairs—sees Chicago blues enjoying an era of unprecedented success that began in the 1990s. Celebrated as great art and party music around the world and especially on its home turf, Chicago blues has been thoroughly mainstreamed in everything from PBS documentaries to advertising to sports talk radio.

Buddy Guy offers the decline faction and the boosters much about which to disagree. Increases over the last forty years in the density and frenzy of his guitar playing, accompanied by verbal and musical homage from rock-star acolytes like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, the Rolling Stones, Carlos Santana, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and most recently Jonny Lang, have turned Guy into an ur-guitar hero and also made him the decline faction's Exhibit A. Purists dismiss his mature guitar style with recurring, resonant phrases. They say that "he plays too many notes," which is shorthand for too much flash and not enough substance and is usually applied to young white guitar wizards with weak blues sensibilities and no singing chops (the kind of whiz kids who usually list Guy among their influences). Decline-minded critics also call his music "white noise," a pejorative reference to what they hear as rock influences.

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The "noisiness" of his playing—the ratio of sounds regarded by critics as extraneous or even antithetical to whatever orthodox blues signal they hear in his music—has become more pronounced, and more lavishly recorded and circulated, since Guy achieved long-delayed commercial success in the 1990s. Finally, after a lifetime of striving in relative obscurity, he had a profitable club and a long-term recording contract with a label that could put some resources behind him; he began to turn up on rock radio, the David Letterman show, and *Saturday Night Live*; he appeared in a Gap ad; his likeness presided over the music sections of Borders stores; Amazon.com pushed his CDs; the city of Chicago began to feature him in its tourism campaigns; and both the city's convention bureau and its office of cultural affairs made a practice of steering business travelers, tourists, and visiting dignitaries to his club. According to extremists in the decline faction, the price of this success has been steep: Guy is not playing Chicago blues—or blues at all—anymore.

Seen from one angle, the opposing factions, both of them interracial coalitions, disagree about the relationship between race and aesthetics. The argument for decline comes close to saying, and sometimes flat out says, that the problem is one of people not knowing their place: black musicians inauthentically playing in a "white" way to satisfy audience demand for the roots of rock, white musicians inauthentically trying and failing to "sound black," white audiences inauthentically "acting black" in the cheapest kind of Saturday-night appropriation rituals—a mutually degrading round of bad-faith love and theft. The boosters make a countervailing universalist argument about the declining musical significance of race: Chicago blues was invented by southern blacks but now belongs to everybody because it speaks to everybody. This "everybody gets the blues" argument often has its heart in the right place, but it can perform curious contortions to avoid the possibility that the social and cultural history of race in America does indeed inflect how the music is made and received.

Seen from another angle, the battle over Chicago blues is about change over time in generic orthodoxy. How much can a cultural form adapt without becoming fundamentally something else? What is still "Chicago" about an eminently portable blues style circulated around the world, a style mutating in a million suburban basements and ten thousand Blue Monday open-mike jams far from the South Side, a style whose primary financial supporters encounter it at theme-park chain clubs like the House of Blues or on car stereos as they tool from subdivision to office park?

The blues is many things to many people—a foundational African-American cultural tradition, a way of being in the world, a philosophical system—but it is also a skilled artistic trade, a *how* and a *what* of music-making that needs to be learned and practiced, and it has taken shape when poured into the vessels of business institutions like clubs and record companies. The transformation of the blues industry in Chicago, and of its product,

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partakes of a larger transformation of all kinds of businesses and of the city itself. The often ungenerous and tautologically deadlocked controversies over the relative blackness, whiteness, and Chicago-ness of Chicago blues tell fragments of this story, which is as simple and as complicated as the explanation offered by Otis Rush, one of Guy's contemporaries, for why he began playing North Side clubs where the blues-rock constituency held sway: "It doesn't matter where I play as long as I got a good guitar and an amplifier. It was jobs up there, they called me, I went."

George "Buddy" Guy grew up in Lettsworth, Louisiana, a small town near Baton Rouge, and came to Chicago in 1957 on the train called the City of New Orleans. He was part of the second and larger phase of the Great Migration, the movement of black southerners to the urban North in the years between the Great Depression and the urban crisis of the 1960s. Guy, a son of sharecroppers, did not come to Chicago to work in a factory, but plenty of his blues-playing colleagues did—and, more generally, factory work made the larger movement possible. Chicago blues can be described as the product of an industrial migration.

This chapter of the story is familiar. The strongest forces guiding black migration to the North included manufacturing booms and labor markets associated with the world wars—especially the second, and the surge in consumer goods that followed it. Add to that the mechanization of southern agriculture and the enabling function of railroads—the paradigmatic high-industrial transport technology, which still pervades the blues soundscape. These industrial pushes and pulls were essential to delivering a critical mass of southern blacks to Chicago by the 1950s, including the musicians, the initial audience, and many of the businesspeople who shaped the Chicago style.

That critical mass produced the golden age of Chicago blues in the 1950s and early 1960s. Among the many blues styles in Chicago, ranging from hokum to jump, the label "Chicago blues" became attached to the adaptation of Mississippi Delta style effected in the 1950s by codifiers, especially Muddy Waters and his circle, and the cohort of immediate second-wave successors who extended their formulas, especially Otis Rush, Magic Sam, and Buddy Guy. These emblematic Chicago stylists made the most of electric amplification, a hard regularization of an often irregular country beat, and the tension between acrobatically lyrical lines of voice or guitar and a dense, grounded, driving ensemble sound. Of all the blues genres, Chicago style may grind the hardest and soar the highest over that grind, producing a peculiarly sharp dynamic of tension and release that generates terrific emotional force. The most important base for the Chicago blues synthesis was Bronzeville, the relatively self-contained Black Metropolis on the near South Side, which was given cohesion by the dynamics of migration and segregation. The near South Side—and then the West Side, as the city's black population overspilled Bronzeville's boundaries—housed not only

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inspired musicians and enthusiastic audiences but also institutions: the independent record companies, the record distributors and retailers, the dance halls, and especially the blues clubs that nurtured and circulated the music.

Although Guy had won some local notoriety as an up-and-coming bluesman in Louisiana, he has said he "felt like a ball in high weeds" when he got to Chicago in 1957. After a period of scuffling and doing manual work, he entered and began to rise in the blues hierarchy by plugging himself into existing institutional structures: the South Side and West Side club circuits, where he was discovered, then the Muddy Waters band, Chess Records, Cobra, and other independent labels. Accounts of Guy's career tend to dwell on an epic cutting contest held at the Blue Flame Club in 1958, a clash of young titans in which Guy did much to make his name by besting Otis Rush and Magic Sam. That night did not make Guy's fortune all by itself, but it renders in shorthand the larger, more diffuse process of finding his way into a richly developed blues scene.

Rush and Magic Sam were, like Guy, southern transplants in their early twenties, but they were already established on the Chicago scene as accomplished young bluesmen with big, supple, gospel-style voices and strong musical personas. Rush was a master of chilling slow blues in a minor key. He squeezed strings with the best of them, bending single notes into affecting microtones and running them down into jazzy, pianistic chords. Everything Magic Sam played, even songs with mournful lyrics, had an infectious good-times quality; his propulsive, meaty picking style made people want to dance. Guy had the good sense to be scared of confronting them in the Blue Flame's competitive atmosphere.

Fueled by strong drink, Guy went crazy. The details of his performance that night, establishing the pattern for decades of future performances, have taken on a stations-of-the-cross quality in frequent retellings. A long-cord gimmick allowed Guy to make his entrance, already playing, out of the bathroom and to exit the front door of the club, still playing, and head down the block in the snow. He played "Sweet Little Angel," a slow blues, in the second-tune slot, during which he threw his guitar on the floor and stomped it, as well as hung it from the rafters and played it there. He parodied both Rush's and Magic Sam's guitar styles, running them through the blender of distortion effects until it all sounded like Buddy Guy. The crowd was agog; Guy was declared the winner. Rush, who did not go in for such hotdogging, and Magic Sam, who was by all reports an easygoing guy, did not dispute the verdict—although they took the liberty of drinking the bottle of whiskey awarded as first prize. Guy got the empty bottle, anyway, and the satisfaction of knowing he was launched.

But the scene as he found it, the scene epitomized by that legend-encrusted night at the Blue Flame, would not last. By the 1960s, as Guy came into his own, the institutional structure of clubs and record labels was

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losing coherence as an enabling framework for the industrial blues synthesis. That process, manifested as weak sales for traditional Chicago blues, loosened up the field of musical possibility but also deprived Guy of a straight-and-narrow generic path. Chicago blues passed through a period of overlap and adjustment in the late 1960s and 1970s until it stabilized in postindustrial form in the 1980s and 1990s.

What happened to the blues business in the 1960s? The answer has several parts. In the record industry, corporate consolidation put the squeeze on independents like Chess, while at the same time major labels attracted by the successes of various R & B forms moved into the independents' former territory. Rock and soul, both pitched to the teenage consumer who emerged from the 1950s as a decisive force shaping popular dance music, drew freely upon blues and largely supplanted it among young people. Blues, with its adult point of view and "country" associations, did not address itself as successfully to that all-important segment of the market. Among black audiences, the shock of the encounter with industrial urbanism began to wane, and the postmigrant generation began to turn from down-home ways—a domestic, African-American version of the second-generation cultural crisis familiar among immigrants. As South-to-North migration slowed, stopped, and eventually reversed, the transplanted southerners who had invented and supported Chicago blues began to age out in earnest. Finally, and crucially, the social landscape of the inner city in which Chicago blues was rooted was in violent motion. Already under a variety of pressures, the institutions that housed Chicago blues were cut loose from their underpinnings during Chicago's transformation from an industrial city of urban villages to a suburbanized postindustrial metropolis.

Two elements of this story have special importance for Chicago blues, because they contributed to the dismantling of the industrial blues synthesis and the emergence of a postindustrial blues synthesis. One is the breakup of the Black Metropolis and the formation of the second ghetto on the South and West Sides. The departure of factory jobs, capital flight, the partial departure of the black middle class, the bulldozing of neighborhoods, the siting of high-rise housing projects, and the subsequent depopulation all contributed to the destruction of Bronzeville's small-business sector. That included blues institutions, which were also reeling from all the other shocks associated with changes in popular music and the record business.

The other principal element of the story is the growth, especially on the North Side lakefront, of redeveloped districts that housed the city's growing numbers of information handlers, symbolic analysts, professionals, and higher-end service workers. They invested in a new set of cultural and economic institutions, including not only places to buy arugula but also the clubs and record labels that now constitute the institutional home of Chicago blues. Most of these new supporters and institution builders were—and are—white.

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The members of the new core blues audience encountered the music most often on college campuses, where they were in training to be postindustrial workers and managers. As they entered the high-consumption period of their lives, they invested in Chicago blues, a style that appealed to them not only because it is good music but also because it scratches an itch for authenticity. Chicago blues answers a demand for "roots" as an aesthetic quality rather than as a social reality. Chicago blues is a real Chicago thing that makes people feel they are getting way down into the texture of neighborhoods, the history of peoples and place, and the logic of hard knocks. Buddy Guy has never set foot in a steel mill, but when in "Five Long Years" he sings, "Got a job in a steel mill, trucking steel like a slave," his fans feel—for better or worse—a satisfying closeness, a sense of access, to a history of folk migration and hard labor associated with Chicago blues that extends all the way back to slavery days.

Buddy Guy was taking a break in a dark, cluttered upstairs room at his club, Legends. This was shortly before he began the summer's touring that would bring him to the Trump Marina. As on almost every evening he spends in Chicago, he had been downstairs at the bar, handling the usual stream of handshakes, praise, and requests from grinning, nodding patrons. The place was crowded, and the surprisingly large operation—he had forty-five employees—was running smoothly. Guy slumped way down in a sprung chair, one leg over the other, knees as high as his chin. He had flown up to Minneapolis earlier in the day to do a photo session with Jonny Lang, whose guest shot on *Heavy Love* was advertised by a prominent orange sticker on the disc's wrapper.

At sixty-one, Guy was more than three times Lang's age, although he did not look it. In fact, he looked less careworn that night than he did when I first encountered him in the late 1970s, a period in which he was frustrated by a stalled career and by owning and running a South Side club, the Checkerboard Lounge, that ate up his money. Now, well set up at Legends and with Silvertone, he had enough money and celebrity to satisfy him. A lean, dark-skinned, well-made man, he has an expressively flexible face. Sometimes when he smiles, a deep, chuckling laugh works up from inside him. A quality of stern passion resides in the laugh—and in his face, too—and he summons it when the conversation warrants a little extra feeling. He was in a mellow mood that night, perhaps feeling his years after a day of traveling.

We were talking about the blues business, specifically about the difference between owning Legends and owning the Checkerboard. Guy took great pride in the Checkerboard. He has long argued for the institutional importance of clubs as the vital training ground for blues talent. "A club is for the young people to have a place to play, be seen, and be heard, be talked about, so record companies will come," he told me. Guy enjoyed the way that black and white blues fans rubbed elbows at the Checkerboard,

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and he was crazy about the way music sounded in the narrow, smoky room. But the Checkerboard also caused him a great deal of pain; it was hard to run a business on Forty-third Street.

"Yeah, I loved that place," he said, smiling at the thought of it, but then his face got harder. "But if they didn't break in there twice a week and rip me off everything I got—and the help I had, I never went in the Checkerboard and they told me, said, 'Well, you made some money, why don't you go buy a steak?' It was always when I went in there I had to go in my pocket. They'd say, 'Send out and get a hundred cases of beer,' or 'The rent ain't been paid since you been gone.'" Besides being ripped off from all sides, he had to protect his customers from neighborhood operators intent on robbing them. Guy said, "I used to have to stand out there at night like a security guard or something. All these people who was doing that was the neighbors who was glad I brought people around to mess with."

Discussing the problem of fear and crime, Americans' favorite reductive shorthand for complicated urban transformations, made Guy angry. "I *don't* like to lie," he said, his voice rising and finding two notes in the last word. "Those are my people who was doing that. I don't like to lie. They did *me* that. And I didn't want nobody white to think that they got ripped off because they was white. They was rippin' off *any*body. They got my car down there too. They broke in my joint all the time. *I* wasn't white." As he tells it, in the end, in 1985, he was robbed of the Checkerboard itself. He was on tour in Europe when trusted associates got together with his landlady to take over the club's lease. He said, "It was like—what do you call that in those countries? Yeah, a coup."

Losing the Checkerboard freed Guy to follow the money and action out of Bronzeville. In 1989, after four years without a club, Guy opened Legends, a much larger and more profitable place in the South Loop, a section of downtown that was once a light manufacturing and flophouse district but in the 1990s became one of Chicago's many fast-growing loft-conversion zones. Legends is across the street from the Hilton and near the city's (and the northern Midwest's) central highway nexus, perfectly positioned where the full range of blues consumers can get to it.

Guy has been especially shrewd and forward-looking in exploiting the tourist trade. Having moved to the North Side and then downtown, the blues business more and more depends on and has a significant role in the city's increasingly important tourist economy. At the time we talked, the city's latest numbers showed that business travelers had spent $5 billion in Chicago the previous year, and pleasure travelers had spent another $2.8 billion—together generating 110,000 jobs. Add to that the vital importance of the culture business to attracting and retaining taxpaying property owners and money-spending renters.

Chicago continues to mature as a city that sells services, atmosphere, and experiences rather than locally manufactured goods or animal parts, and

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blues enjoys a corresponding new importance in the packaging of Chicago-ness. The most readily consumed packages condense Chicago-ness into images and atmospheres with familiar associations: the view from the Michigan Avenue bridge; the historical charge of big shoulders and hog butchers; the nostalgic appeal of robber-baron swankiness and the salt-of-the-earth charm of the urban village; a smokestack city rising from the prairie grass, a city of skyscrapers and high-end chain stores rising from the ruins of the smokestack city; sports, lots of sports; ethnic foods and ethnic music. Urban blues serves as one of the most effective and recognizable packages, one of the best ways to brand black Chicago in particular and Chicago in general. Warner Hedrick III, who was then managing the Chicago House of Blues, might have been talking about the whole city when he told me, "Blues by itself doesn't pay the bills, but blues is a hook for the resell."

I paid Hedrick a visit at the House of Blues the day after I talked to Guy. We sat in a windowless office deep within a low, curvaceous building—which once housed a bowling alley and resembles nothing so much as a whale—sited between the two corncob-shaped high-rises of Marina City. The Marina City complex fronts the Chicago River where the Loop meets the city's showcase district, the Near North Side. One cannot call the House of Blues a club; it is a small theme park, with a state-of-the-art main music hall, a restaurant, bars, private party rooms, a gift shop that does a brisk business, and, next door, the House of Blues Hotel, which was under construction at the time we talked. "It's an entertainment complex," said Hedrick. Youngish and tanned, outfitted in black clothes and a good haircut, fluent in business-speak, he was a poster boy for corporate hipness. "Ten, fifteen thousand people a week come through the doors. Our issues are hospitality issues. It's very similar to a hotel environment; hotels sell rooms, we sell entertainment. We have auxiliary venues in the building that service the guests, same as in a hotel where the rooms division brings in the folks and the restaurant and room service provide the resell. Initially, the sell here is the talent—that's what brings people in the door. Then if we make an impact at the individual level, they'll come back."

Business was good. Tourists from outside the metropolis and locals in tourist mode feel drawn to the House of Blues's clean, safe environment (with parking nearby), which features near-perfect insulation from the messiness of public space and the public life it harbors. People who have learned to value the sense of consuming under the tightly controlled conditions offered by television can find that state incarnated in Disney's venues, in casinos, or in the House of Blues. "I think our success is that we create a whole different vibe," Hedrick said. "Being in this building, I don't think you're going to know in any way that you're in Chicago till you step outside the door. It's like you're stepping into a whole different environment."

The House of Blues company already operated venues in cities across the country (including, at this writing, clubs in the theme-park cities of

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Orlando, Anaheim, and Las Vegas), a record label, a radio division, and a national concert tour, with digital media next on the agenda. A business that big cannot rely on the relatively esoteric appeal of blues to pay the bills. "When we came into Chicago," said Hedrick, "we offended some people who misunderstood and thought we were saying we were *the* house of blues in Chicago. That's not what we're about, though. We're into the entertainment industry, and we're into music in all facets and capacities. We're not about blues. Blues is what we come from, as all music comes from, and we're a spin-off of the blues environment, because that's, you know, the foundation of most music in America." As a distinctive hook that helps bring in people for the resell, the blues content of the House of Blues has to feel like the real thing to a variety of customers, including—and here is the tricky part—a majority whose notion of the real thing derives from blues-derived rock, the Blues Brothers, and similarly second- or third-order sources. This state of affairs gave Hedrick a case of authenticity anxiety. "We try to maintain the integrity of the concept," he told me. "We're trying to balance the business with the philosophy of the company. I don't want it to be strictly business, strictly corporation, because it loses its edge and becomes corporate and you get all these suits, you know, you get all your ya-yas coming in here. We want to maintain our edge, being a little funky."

"Funky" was clearly a corporate buzzword at the House of Blues. So was "cool." The theme for the next House of Blues tour had not been chosen yet, but, Hedrick assured me, "They will have a cool name for it. It *will* be cool." In the company's in-house culture, "cool" means "cool," but it also means "in keeping with the brand, therefore conducive to profit."

The Chicago House of Blues forms a link in a corporate chain, but everyone I spoke to there insisted that it was not like the Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, and similar enterprises. Hedrick had to leave to meet with an alderman, but on his way out he said, "That's what I'll leave you with. We make sure we don't cross that boundary where we become cookie-cutter—what's the word? I say it all the time." Adell O'Bryant, the young black public relations officer who was shepherding me around the House of Blues (and whose voice mail message ended, "Have a blessed day"), helped him out. "We're not themed," she said, with sweet conviction. "Yeah," said Hedrick, "we're not themed, and we're not a theme-branded entity, because then we'd fall into . . ." He let the sentence trail off, leaving me to imagine an unspeakably uncool fate.

Buddy Guy has led the way in effecting the genre's single most important formal mutation: the rising proportional importance of guitar and the corresponding decline in the importance of singing. This is what people mean, often imprecisely, when they say that Chicago blues is turning into guitar rock. Guy can sing blues masterfully, but mostly he plays a lot of loud, fast, often very unvocal electric guitar, and that goes a long way

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toward defining the generic standard to which younger musicians now aspire. When I talked about the dominance of guitar with Bruce Iglauer, the schizophrenically decline-minded booster who founded Alligator Records, he gestured at a pile of packages against one wall of his office and said, "See that? Those are audition recordings. I guarantee you that for 70 percent of those my letter back will say, 'If you had taken as much time thinking about your singing as your guitar playing, you would have a tape that I might want to listen to.' Singing is the *one* most important thing in Chicago blues, and it's getting hard to find people—any people, black or white—who can sing in this style."

It is no longer possible to say that most of the hot guitar playing in Chicago blues advertises itself as an extension of the human voice raised in song. That identity between voice and instrument was once a fundamental element of Delta style and early Chicago style. It helped to define the Delta and Chicago blues signal, an indicator that musician and audience were communicating on a blues frequency. The rebalancing of that relationship has produced much of what purists hear as interference and dismiss as "too many notes" or "noise."

Given the concatenation of circumstances driving the swing from voice to guitar, it should come as no surprise that Buddy Guy—a guitar freak who listens to a variety of other guitar players, who remains perpetually eager to lead a willing audience toward ecstasy, who is always happy to take thirty or forty exploratory choruses of guitar solo—comes at least halfway to his rock-trained audience's aesthetic ground by playing in ways that depart significantly from blues orthodoxy as defined in the 1950s.

But, in keeping with a policy of constructive skepticism toward any decline or booster narrative, I hesitate to accept the characterization of Guy's stylistic evolution as a simple case of focus-group musicianship. With twenty-plus years of close attention to Buddy Guy's live and recorded music to back me up, I can say with confidence that his will to abstraction forms a potent artistic impulse that was going to find expression one way or another.

Guy has always tried to push past the conventional boundaries of blues sound. In the 1950s, before he even came to Chicago, he was already experimenting with feedback, distortion, and other effects that injured the sensibilities of some of his elders. The blues, of course, has a distinguished tradition of noisemaking and experimentation, but that tradition often produces tension where it encounters generic orthodoxies. In the early 1960s, as a respected Chicago sideman, Guy tried to introduce some of these effects at the Chess Records studios, only to be curbed by Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, and especially Leonard Chess. "Actually," he told an interviewer in the early 1990s, "a lot of sustained notes that you hear us all doing now—and Hendrix said he was getting this from me—I was doing out in the public early on. Chess Records called it *noise,* they wouldn't let me cut it. They was telling me, 'Who's going to listen to that noise?' "

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Even when restrained by senior bluesmen or blues formula—perhaps especially *because* he so manifestly came up against those restraints—Guy's pressing at the boundaries of blues genre made him a mentor to the founding generation of rock-guitar heroes. These men, most of them younger than Guy and many of them British, listened to and emulated the exciting music he made as a young man in the 1950s and 1960s. Guy was not playing rock (even though some of his peers in Chicago thought he was), but he was attempting explorations rooted in and extending beyond Chicago blues norms, a model for the rockers. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Guy led the way in redefining Chicago orthodoxy in partnership with fans who had built their musical intelligence around just those rock-guitar heroes who had imitated him in the 1960s. He has put himself in a position to let himself go, unpoliced, where he always wanted to go, while pleasing his core audience by broadcasting a signal they are equipped to receive, satisfying their demand for blues that rocks. Scott Holt, the young white Tennesseean with astounding guitar chops and modest singing skills who has backed Guy for more than a decade, says that Guy's detractors "miss the point of Buddy playing a Clapton tune or a Hendrix tune. He's not being lazy, he's not pandering. He's showing how that stuff *liberated* him to play the way he always felt."

I first encountered Buddy Guy in the late 1970s, when I was entering high school and trying to find a way between the two popular musical monoliths that dominated teen culture. On one side, looming up like Stonehenge, was classic rock, the unremitting bombast of which had already worn out my patience. On the other side, perhaps even more imposing (on the South Side of Chicago, anyway), was the soul-funk combine, which I liked as music but which made what I regarded as unreasonable social demands regarding dance, dress, and comportment. New wave and punk rock made even more unreasonable demands. Expressing a desire to listen to them felt like rushing a fraternity. Blues, like jazz, offered an alternative world that came with a history to explore, opportunities for both connoisseurship and instrumental dabbling, and a social climate dominated by adults uninterested in adolescent melodrama—which encouraged me to take a welcome break from such melodrama myself. And unlike jazz, blues commanded a good view of both rock and soul; well-worn aesthetic paths led back and forth from blues to the other genres.

So I found my way to the Checkerboard Lounge on Forty-third Street, where a thirteen-year-old could get in and order drinks, no questions asked, and where Buddy Guy presided over a remarkable collection of musical talent spanning the postwar period. From time to time you could catch first-wave postwar codifiers like Muddy Waters or Willie Dixon. There were representatives of Guy's generation, the second wave that refined Chicago blues, like Junior Wells, the subtle guitar master Sammy Lawhorn,

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and the impassioned Texas transplant Fenton Robinson (whose spare, elegant version of "I'm Going to Chicago" was being piped in to welcome travelers at O'Hare Airport in the late 1990s). Magic Slim exemplified the third wave. His band, the Teardrops, played weeknights at the Checkerboard for years. There were younger apprentices, ranging from new traditionalists like John Primer and Valerie Wellington to progressive revisionists like Dion Payton and the 43rd Street Blues Band. There were local characters like the half brothers Lefty Dizz and Johnny Dollar, respectively the gentlest and most ill-tempered musicians around. Lefty Dizz, who resembled the Cat in the Hat both in appearance and in his gift for turning a dull evening into a chaotic good time, ran the Monday night jam. (He also played my senior prom.) Touring blues stars and Guy's rock-star disciples would drop in late after playing shows on the North Side or at suburban arenas. And, often enough, there was Buddy Guy, who kept a guitar behind the bar and would get it out and plug in when somebody else played well enough to be considered a challenge. He was at the height of his powers and of his career frustration back then, the moment when he recorded his masterpiece, *Stone Crazy*, and that made for supercharged music. Unlike arena-sized musical scenes, the Checkerboard happened on a human scale. It cost two dollars to get in most nights; drinks were a buck and change; and during set breaks, when the weather allowed, musicians and audience alike went outside and stood around on the sidewalk talking shop, a living portrait of the overlap between industrial and postindustrial blues syntheses.

Late one winter night in 1979, after an evening at the Checkerboard, I got a ride back as far as Hyde Park and set out to walk the rest of the way home to South Shore through Jackson Park. It was one of my favorite walks; plus, as usual, I had spent all my money at the club. Too cold to bother with my regular cautious practice of keeping to the shadows of the tree line, I walked briskly down the median strip of the park drive, alone under the lights except for sparse late traffic. After a while, a black cab driver in a giant red-and-white American cruiser of late 1960s vintage, pulled over and generously offered to take me home free of charge. I was chilled, despite ingesting antifreeze in various forms earlier in the evening, so I accepted his offer.

We rolled through the Olmstedian reaches of Jackson Park, the South Side's grandest park, which had been the site of the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. It occurs to me now (and certainly did not then) that the exposition of 1893 was all about the profound cultural consequences of economic and social transformation—not the postindustrial but an earlier version, the industrial transformation of culture, complete with its own racial and musical valences mapped on a schematic urban landscape. To our left were lagoons on the site of the White City, the exposition's model in plaster of the beautiful life that factory machines would produce. To the

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right was the Midway, along which had been arranged an exotic display of the exploitable peoples of the world. The young Edgar Rice Burroughs drove up and down the Midway, demonstrating a prototype automobile; Buffalo Bill made theater of the exposition's racial politics, and the aging Frederick Douglass made a speech in protest of them. There were musical performers, too: Scott Joplin, for instance, and Little Egypt, who either did or did not dance the Hootchy Kootchy to beguiling tunes, but became famous for it in any case. (Generations later, Chicago bluesmen would be singing a new, regendered set of beguiling tunes about Hoochie Koochie, as it was now spelled.) It was all long gone. The Golden Lady, a reduced replica of the statue that had presided over the exposition, oxidized peacefully with arms upraised in a landscape of groves and water, her back turned to a parking lot where rough customers in the sex and drug businesses circled all night in their cars.

The cabbie and I got to talking about where I had been that night. He became animated as he talked about young people taking up and extending blues traditions. A sixtyish black working man of southern birth (as he told me) and a young white information-handler-to-be, we were, after all, representatives of Chicago's two principal blues constituencies. He said, "There's a lot of good new blues out there," and I agreed, thinking of several up-and-coming musicians who frequented the Checkerboard and hoped to be discovered there as Buddy Guy once had been at the Blue Flame, but the cabbie was headed in another direction. He said, "People don't realize it, but Aerosmith and Steve Miller and Foghat—that's *blues.* That's some good blues." From my position of authority—a teenaged genre purist stretched out on the backseat, looking up at the rose-colored urban night sky through the cab's rear window—I remonstrated with him. I told him that wasn't blues, not even close, and to think of it as blues was an insult to Magic Slim, Otis Rush, and the rest of the hardcore Chicago stylists. "You got to *listen,*" he urged me. "Aerosmith and them are playing some serious blues. They change it around some, that's all, so the young people will like it." I thought at first that he was simply going out of his way to establish common ground by extolling music he assumed I liked, but he convinced me that he truly heard classic rock as blues—that he regarded the blues-rock synthesis as a viable aesthetic enlivened by the two-way traffic of influence, not as an artistic catastrophe arcing ever-downward. I was having none of it, but he was doing me a favor, and I thought it would be churlish to argue further. Also, I felt awkward telling a black southerner of a certain age what was and was not blues. When we got through the park and into South Shore, I asked him to drop me up the block from my house to facilitate my skulking in undetected. When I got out, I thanked him, and he entreated me to abandon my doctrinaire position. His parting words were "Give those white boys a chance."

I was reminded of him when I talked to Buddy Guy about the changing

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situation of Chicago blues, specifically when I asked Guy about playing for the rock-trained audiences he commands these days. He took my question to be about playing for white people, and he asserted, as he usually does, a universalist truism. "Music has no color," he said. "I never think of music like that." But then he fixed me with an odd look, serious around the mouth but less so around the eyes, and said, "I was born and raised in the South. My mama and daddy told me before they died, they said, 'Son, you're grown. If you marry a *elephant* and bring her home—if you love her, we like her. *You* got to sleep with her, *I* ain't.'" There was, to say the least, a double edge to the anecdote. His parents urged him, as the cabbie urged me, to be tolerant and open-minded, and Guy has prospered in the end by being tolerant and open-minded about the parameters of blues genre and the aesthetic, racial, and class politics of the blues business. But Guy's rendering of his parents' advice also suggests a warning that any resulting alliances he might make, with amorous elephants or adoring blues-rock fans, would constitute making his own bed, in which he would then have to lie.

His music reposes in a bed of changes and contradictions—a complicated situation, both decline and renaissance and also neither. You can hear it in the music.

Chicago blues is the urgently immediate music it always was; Chicago blues has become something new, strange, and nostalgic.

Chicago blues is a local art form; Chicago blues is music for tourists.

Chicago blues does not pay the bills; Chicago blues is a vital hook for the big-time resell of culture.

Chicago blues is an atavistic industrial art form; Chicago blues is a revitalized postindustrial art form.

Chicago blues is black music; Chicago blues is not black music.

Chicago blues is in decline; Chicago blues is booming.

Chicago blues is all right; Chicago blues is not all right; it's in a distinctly bluesy condition.

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On the Acropolis

KENNETH KOCH

It doesn't seem as though we could die up here, does it?
The Acropolis is so old that death on it seems superfluous.
So we can afford to take some chances—
Leap off the wall! Bash statues with our heads!

God smiles down at the Acropolis. It's a good church
But with the wrong idea. Then he is distracted by his children
Scattered among the chambers of the sea.

Old friends, I am thinking of you still.
You built the Acropolis but you didn't build it for me.

The Acropolis has a uniform
That no schoolboy can wear because it is invisible.
"It goes to the Periclean School!"

When I first came to Greece
I was twenty-five years old
And I've learned so little since
That the Greeks already knew!
Almost nothing!
I don't know why this is—
Mathematics, astronomy
All have remained dim to me—
I should have applied myself!
My "life" got in the way
But what was in my life
Inimical to Greece?

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Those who put me off by their irony
Are unlike the Acropolis.
Or at least unlike the way it seems.
If the whole Acropolis were ironic,
I mean an ironic comment,
It would be a huge joke
Enjoyable frightening and laughable-at without end!

Go to look at it at sunset when it's PINK
My guidebook said. Good advice about anything, I suppose.
Or, after some road has been mended, when it smells like tar.
"When you are in love, go hear your beating heart."

Aeschylus and Socrates
Used to sit and chat up here
On the old rocks beneath the light of the very old sun
And one of their frequent subjects was
How young or old they felt or were.
"I am getting on, Socrates," says Aeschylus.
"Oh no," cries Socrates, "you still look like a boy!"

Plato would walk up here when he was tired
And talk to the alas-dead Socrates—
"Master I have come to a wall
And with statues and columns beyond it. What should I do?"
"Keep walking," the dead one counsels,
"And walking and walking, until the end.
You know it, know what to do—you are my best pupil."

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What a car would do on the Acropolis
I can't imagine. But a deer or a beaver could
Build a home here while the light turned red
And sank into the Aegean.

The "wave of the future"
Never waved over the Acropolis.
It was never in any sense prophetic
Or meant to be prophetic
Of what was to come.
As long as the original lasted
The present was the only time.

Acropolis, Acropole, Acropolexis,
Acro—high, outermost, ultimate, never taken, undivulged,
Single-hearted, far, furious, added to *Polis,* city
High-up city, but what a curious city you are
With more god-objects per second than people in the street!

Greek people who are used to it
Say, "Oh, up there!"
On the Great Wall
A thousand miles of moonlight
Wrote Li Ho.
The Acropolis you can see all at once—
The Parthenon its nose
The Erechtheum its mouth
The Propylaea (entrance stairs) its teeth.

You can't find a glass of water
On the Acropolis or in Notre Dame
Or on the Great Wall of China. No use trying! There just isn't one there!

There are also no comic books on the Acropolis.
Though there are some on the subject of the Acropolis.
I buy a few down below, on the city's streets,
HELLAS KOMIKS and E PARTONIKI.

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The tyrant Pisistratus used it for a fortress
To boss the life-loving Athenians until five hundred twenty-seven B.C.
At which time there was only one temple up here, the Hecatompedon
About face! Present
Arms! You're under arrest! You have nothing but Persian papers,
no good up here!

On Mount Athos you could be a Persian
Or a Thessalian or a Macedonian but you couldn't be a woman—
The slightest evidence and off you go! No females allowed—
Not even a butterfly or a squirrel.

"I have a guest over at my house."
But it isn't Apollo
I'll bet
And is it Hermes Trismegistus by any chance?
Apollo FLAYED someone
For competing with him in music.
How horrible, cruel, and sadistic (it was Marsyas).

As for Diana the punishment for seeing her naked was losing your eyes
Your liver and your heart. You were a dead Achaean
Never again to walk by the Aegean.

Yet they say it would be better for us
If we had this kind of mythology of our own
Instead of Daniel Boone and Jimmy Carter—
I look up at the sky and I see a constellation
Of Jimmy Carter signing an anti-pollution bill
And of Hermes tearing the insides out of a bear!

And to deal with the horrible tangle inside me
I don't know which to choose. Lucky, we have both.

The giant Athena statue
Gave the Persians pause.
Persian Number One said

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If they have a goddess as great as that—
And Persian Number Three said
You're right! We'd better go!
Fast! Persian Number Two
Applied for citizenship
To become an Athenian.

It rains on the Acropolis I don't get wet
I am an American
The rain is twenty-five hundred years ago.

No one lives on the Acropolis tonight but the Acropolis Rat.

Acropole! Out of the earth
Came your marble, out of the sea
Came your earth, out of the air
The gods and goddesses
Who have been with you since you were zero years old!

The Acropolis has a strong format:
Temple, temple, temple, you have it up to here!
Gorgeous sources of divine misinformation,
One after another, blather blather blather, idiocy of the sky.

"The Acropolis has been
Removed from serious contention
By the historical operation
Of di-ectomy: removal of the gods."
So says the report.
But who is writing it?

Kenneth Koch, who died in July, was a poet of the New York School and longtime Professor of Poetry at Columbia University. He won the first Phi Beta Kappa Poetry Award (made possible by the Joseph and May Winston Foundation) for his book *New Addresses*. This fall Knopf will publish *Sunout*, a collection of poems from 1952 to 1954, as well as *A Possible World*, a new collection.

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The Raised Voice of Poetry

JAMES FENTON

Poetry begins in those situations when the voice has to be raised: the hawker has to make himself heard above the market hubbub, the knife grinder has to call the cook out into the street, the storyteller has to address a whole village, the bard must command the admiration of the court. And even today, in the prolonged aftermath of modernism, in places where "open form" or free verse is the orthodoxy, you will find a memory of that raising of the voice in the phrase "heightened speech." Poetry is language to which a special emphasis has been given, whether by paring it down and arranging it pleasingly on the page, in lines whose length may be baffling to all but the poet, or by the traditional means, which include raising the voice in order to be heard above the crowd; raising the voice in order to demonstrate its beauty and power; chanting the words; reciting the words rhythmically; punctuating the units of speech (what will become the lines of the poem) with rhymes; setting the words to tunes; setting the words to tunes and singing them in unison, as in a drinking song.

Some decades ago, it was considered bad form, in the world of poetry readings, to do anything that smacked of performance. That poets had once performed their works, chanting them in a manner that approached the bardic, was very much held against them. It was showing off. It was inauthentic. It went out with Yeats and Dylan Thomas.

One night I found myself reading at a technical college, next door to a rugby club dinner. There was nothing for it but to raise the voice, to raise

James Fenton, former Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, is the author of *A Garden from a Hundred Packets of Seeds*, *The Strength of Poetry*, and *Out of Danger*. This essay was excerpted from *An Introduction of English Poetry*, which will be published this winter by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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it as loud as I dared. Competing with a drinking song, I turned what I had imagined to be a meditative poem into a full-volume declaration of identity: this is who I am, I seemed to be saying; here I stand, I can no other! Somewhat, but only somewhat, to my horror, the poem appeared to go down very well. I was no stranger to showing off, but I would never normally have shown off in that particular way. One read, or one recited, in the way Auden recited his poems: the proper style was self-deflation.

Since then, I have visited countries in which very few of our assumptions about poetry are shared. I remember a Cambodian picking up my copy of Larkin's anthology of English poetry, and chanting a few pages to himself, uncomprehendingly—because there was to him no other way of rendering a line of verse than by chanting out loud. In Borneo, I was lucky enough to hear a contest of improvised song, which went on through the night. In the Philippines, I knew an illiterate man who had the gift for extempore verse in the traditional Tagalog form, and I paid attention to the way he raised his voice to an appropriate pitch for eloquence.

Some of my educated Filipino friends were aspiring poets, but their aspirations were all in the direction of the United States. They had no desire to learn from the bardic tradition that continued in the barrios. Their ideal would have been to write something that would get them to Iowa, where they would study creative writing. My friends thought of themselves as nationalists, but they did not seem to connect their nationalism with their native poetic traditions. Of course they knew about these traditions, but they probably felt that they could not compete on that ground. Whereas my uneducated, indeed illiterate, friend, to whom the word *Iowa* meant nothing, had a living part in his own tradition, because it was oral and not literary.

Around the same time, I came into close contact with some aspiring American poets—not far from Iowa—and noted in them a familiar negativity in their attitude toward poetic tradition. They felt, in some degree, antipathetic to any poetry not contemporary, and they seemed to recognize contemporary poetry only through a set of negative definitions: it did not rhyme; it did not use meter; it was not interested in form other than what was called "open form," which was understood to be, when it came down to it, no form at all. "Heightened speech" was the mantra these poets used, when cornered, to distinguish poetry from prose, but their heightening could not include specifically poetic words, or archaisms, or the special tricks of grammar poets have used in the past.

Most striking to me was the fact that these American poets had a range of tastes in music, and therefore in the lyrics to music, that bore no relation at all to their taste in poetry. It was as if there were a separate part of their brain that dealt with these matters. What is more, in that separate part of the brain, things were really much clearer than in the poetic part. In the musical part of their brains they knew very well what they liked and wanted

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to hear, and wanted to imitate if they, for instance, were to pick up a guitar and play a tune, or even compose a song. Whereas in the poetic part, their judgments were defensive and somewhat nervous. There was clarity on one side, confusion on the other.

It occurred to me that these poets would be happier if they broke down the barriers in their own brains, if they accepted that the person who was studying creative writing, with the aim of producing poetry, was the same person who had a car full of country and western tapes, or whatever the music was that delighted them. The person who tolerated bad lines in a song lyric was the same person who would tolerate no rhymes at all in a poem. The taste that delighted in the rhythms of rap belonged to the same owner as the taste that had banished meter from poetry.

And there was another notable thing about these aspiring poets, when seen in action in front of an audience—it was quite clear that they would have liked to *perform* for the pleasure of the audience, but that they were hampered by the fact that what they were reading out had been written for the page. They knew this, with one part of the brain, for they asserted, under pressure of questioning, that modern poetry, properly understood, was written for the eye rather than the ear. Whatever "heightening" it involved, or whatever they did to increase its specific gravity, aural considerations did not enter. But when they stood up in front of an audience, often they would seek to provide some kind of extra interest by making up for what was lacking in the text. And how often one hears even successful and respected poets doing the same! They read to the audience in a manner that is designed to convey *what the poem looks like on the page,* since, truth to tell, the poem was written to look well, not to sound well.

But these poets also would be happier, it occurred to me, if they—even without going so far as to change their basic poetic practice—did themselves a favor and wrote something, a single poem even, that they could perform. So that, after the agony of standing in front of an audience reading words that were *specifically designed not to be read out loud,* they could, before leaving the podium, cheer everyone up with something worth listening to. Now you might ask how it came about that these poets ever even considered mounting the podium, since the precepts of their art militated against it. The answer is that they had probably never really thought through the consequences of their poetic practice, which, as I said, was to proceed by a series of negative definitions: no rhyme, no meter, et cetera. Sometimes, however, I think that poets make no connection between what they do when writing and what happens at a reading.

This may seem implausible, but I shall never forget a confrontation at an international poetry festival between an African and an American poet. The African poet had brought musical instruments with him. He sang and accompanied himself, extemporizing on themes that he, in between times, would explain to the audience. The American was one of those who "wrote

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for the page," and over dinner one night he decided to tell the African poet how inconsiderate his kind of performance was. You don't realize, he said, how difficult you make it for the person who reads after you, when you sing your songs and play those instruments. The accusation was that the African poet got the audience into a mood that was prejudicial against the type of poetry the American had to offer—which he implied was the mainstream poetry (at least as far as the festival was concerned).

The African replied in terms that surprised me at first. You American poets, he said, and you European poets, you think that because you are poets you are very important, whereas I am an African, and I don't think I am important at all. When I go into a village and begin to tell a story, the first thing the audience will do is interrupt me. They will ask questions about the story I am telling, and if I do not work hard, they will take over the story and tell it among themselves. I have to work to get the story back from them.

What had struck me as overweening in the American poet—his view that, because his poetry had only limited appeal, other poets should rein in their own performances so as not to show him up—was, to the African, only part of the story. We all assumed that, because we were poets, the audience would listen to us in appreciative silence. A hush would fall when we approached the rostrum, and when we sat down there would be applause. But to the African these seemed arrogant assumptions. To him, every scrap of attention and appreciation had to be worked for.

In the long run, however polite the audiences have been to our faces, the African poet is right: every scrap of attention and appreciation has to be fought for. A text may be written for the page. Or the written words may be no more than a notation for a performance. But even the most docile of audiences will feel, in the end, that we have overdrawn on its goodwill if we do not ensure we deserve the attention we demand. What the African poet knew within seconds of standing up, we will assuredly learn in due course. We will learn whether we deserve to be heard.

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Sensitive

ANDREW HUDGINS

I am high-strung. I have ants in my pants. I'm a jitterbug, a worrywart, a wiggle worm, a nervous Nellie, a princess-and-the-pea type. I am, according to my mother, *sensitive*—a term I kicked against for years because I thought it meant a value judgment on her part, though I was not sure whether the judgment was positive or negative. My father preferred to call me *nervous*.

I bit my fingernails to the quick, and then, with my teeth, peeled the nail down past the quick, a delicate maneuver that often left me with painful and bloody fingertips. When Mom ordered me not to bite my nails, I picked at them with my index fingers and ate the white slivers that I tore free. For years, the nails of my index fingers had notches worn in them from being used as tools on the other nails. When I was in high school, my mother, desperate to stop me from mutilating my fingers, painted my nails with a clear, bitter polish that puckered my face inside out. Within two weeks, I no longer tasted it.

As I learned from reading "Dear Abby" (one of my essential sources of information when I was a boy), I have a bashful bladder, which means I find it almost impossible to pee when other people are in the room. Public school rest rooms were a torment, and I frequently had to go all day without urinating. In the five rushed minutes between classes, I simply couldn't get my motor started while I was standing in an open stall, the room raucous with shouting boys and hazy with cigarette smoke, which nauseated me. If someone happened to notice that I had zipped up without producing, the joking made it even harder to go the next time. Through high school and college I dreaded being drafted, less because I was afraid of being killed in action in Vietnam than because I was afraid of being unable to pee in a barracks full of men.

Andrew Hudgins, Professor of English at Ohio State University, is the author of *The Glass Anvil*, a collection of essays, as well as five books of poetry, of which *Babylon in a Jar* is the most recent. He is a frequent contributor to the SCHOLAR.

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I have restless leg syndrome, which means my legs jiggle almost uncontrollably at times, and I am often kept awake when they lash out at night. When I was in junior high, my parents took me to a psychologist who returned time and again to my twitching legs.

"Why do you jerk your legs like that?"

"I don't know. I've always done it."

"I'll tell you what. Get them going very fast. Yes, that's right. Now, stop."

I stopped.

"Now say, 'I want to get up and leave this place.'"

"I want to get up and leave this place."

"Does that sound right to you? Does that sound like something you want to say but can't, so your legs are saying it for you?"

"No," I said.

We repeated the exercise twice more, and twice more I said "no" at the end. The psychologist was obviously frustrated and a bit annoyed by my obtuseness. But did she think that even a fourteen-year-old boy could not have pondered her obvious symbolism? If it were that easy to figure out, I'd have stopped it a long time ago.

Jiggling my legs, I made my mother's Hummel figurines vibrate on a display case from across the room. Sitting in a chair at my grandmother's kitchen table, my knees jerking up and down like the needle on her sewing machine, I made the windows in her shotgun shack in Georgia rattle in their frames. In California, where we lived, people suddenly cocked their ears as they picked up the tremors from my legs, and shouted "Earthquake!" In movies, on airplanes, and at parties, I've had strangers clamp their hands on my frenetic knees and hiss "Stop that!" I sympathize. Having to feel the vibrations of another person must be extremely irritating. For a while, exercising my will, I can stop. But soon the automatic nervous response resumes.

As a young child I had a stutter. I barely remember it. But it has recurred once or twice in times of adult stress, and I've enjoyed the sensual way the lips get stuck on words and the mouth chews at them, trying to form them, like mastication in reverse. After I slow down and compose myself, the word suddenly pops out, and the sentence continues its flow till the next *p* or *b* or *d* freezes on my lips. As long as it's mild and short-lived, I find this way of talking amusing, oddly pleasurable. But I do not enjoy the eye tic, or the strange patches of tingling numbness that floated randomly across my torso and into my limbs when I was going through my divorce. Let us not even discuss the asthmatic wheeze that sometimes rides on top of my breathing, or the way I often grind my teeth at night, to wake in the morning with a tense and aching jaw. Or the choking sensation from which my father also suffers, our throats suddenly locking in mid-swallow. During the misbegotten Freudian phase that took up most of my twenties, I spent hours and hours trying to decipher whether I had repressed an incident

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of childhood sexual abuse that was making itself known in this charmless fashion.

And those are just the physical manifestations of my "sensitivity." As a boy I was also prone to weeping, rages, night terrors, extreme shyness, insomnia, and depression. As I write these things about myself, I feel a little like the dog in the Lost and Found column: "Lost—Three-legged dog, one eye missing. Castrated. Right ear torn off in dogfight. Has mange. Answers to the name Lucky."

I do feel more or less lucky with my afflictions, if that is not too grand a word to describe them—lucky that they aren't worse and lucky that I can work around them. We've grown up together, we understand one another, and they are rarely severe enough to stop me from doing anything I want to do. But it is unnerving to feel that my body and mind are often outside my control. That way of living gives me a sense of chaos that most people I know don't have, and a sense of human fragility and limitation that my wife assures me is thoroughly un-American.

Did *sensitive,* my catchall term, mean that I was better than other people because I saw, felt, and heard things they didn't, and felt them more deeply? Or did it mean that I was barely suitable for life because I was driven into rages by sounds that didn't seem to bother other people, withdrew into books, brooded over people's words and motives, and did mediocre work in school because I couldn't focus on the tasks at hand? Did it mean I was a freak, like a turtle born without a carapace? I wanted to know what the word meant to my mother so I could begin to figure out what it meant to me.

In truth, I think my mother was ambivalent. She was impatient with my nervousness and sometimes angry with me because of it. She didn't see why I couldn't wear the heavy tweed pants she had bought years before when my father was stationed in England. She had waited patiently for me to grow into them, and when I squirmed through church on a hot California Sunday, tears leaking down my face, plucking at the rough wool, holding it off the skin of my inner thighs, she was infuriated. If I just didn't think about it, it wouldn't bother me, she explained. I was twelve. I didn't have the language to explain to her that my nerves were in such an uproar from the fabric that I couldn't do anything except think about it. She didn't see why the dripping faucet kept me awake. It didn't bother anyone else. She didn't see why I just couldn't go out and make friends. My brothers didn't have any trouble doing it. She didn't understand why I lay on my bed crying, day after day, worn out by assaults that weren't assaults to other people.

But as my psychologist suggested, I think she liked having a child she could talk to about her problems and who understood them, or who knew enough to act as if he understood. Women have often told me that I'm a good listener, an ability that comes naturally to me. Other people

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always seemed so different from me that I paid very close attention to them, partly out of innate interest, partly to learn how to pretend I was normal. Because she had always wanted a daughter, Mom confided in me as she would have in a girl. She told me about her family and her fights with my father's family. She told me about how much she resented my father's temper; several times she said, "If it weren't for you boys, I'd have left that man years ago." When I was fourteen, I did not trust my perceptions enough to be confident that she was just letting off steam, so for years I bore both the guilt of making her unhappy and the fear that she would in fact leave.

At the same time my mother expected me to make the adult discrimination that she wasn't serious, I think that she, proud of being a tomboy and a jock herself, had a certain contempt for me. When I was young, she'd suddenly look up guiltily from whatever she was saying, and snap, "Why don't you go outside and play with the other kids? It's not good for you to stay cooped up in the house with me all day." She'd force me to go outside, where I'd sit in the dirt and play with my plastic army men. She was worried, of course, that her sensitive boy would grow up to be a sissy. I wondered about it myself. Perhaps I *was* a sissy. To feel constantly assaulted, to be weak, to weep and beg for silence is to be feminized, in the old pejorative sense of the word.

But just as my male homosexual friends knew at a very early age that their sexual desires were focused on other men, I instinctively knew that I was not gay. Before I had desire, I knew that when I did have it I would desire women, though I still worried about being perceived as gay. While I could feel my mother's worry, I never shared it. And in the end I think that she was simply thrilled to have a child and that she blamed herself for my jumpy and high-strung nature.

Mom attributed my nerves to my being born eight weeks prematurely and then put into an incubator of a type that left many children retarded or with developmental problems—though I, she assured me, was fine. I listened with a poker face. I knew that she was reassuring herself as much as she was reassuring me. And I knew in some way she was right. I was fine. None of my problems was truly crippling. My brother-in-law, a pediatric anesthesiologist, tells me that if my problems did start with the incubator, they probably arose more from my being left untouched under bright lights twenty-four hours a day than from the incubator itself.

What my mother failed to tell me is that I was born to a couple nearly broken with grief. Though I was not to discover it till much later, I was born four months after the death of my two-year-old sister in a car accident. My mother had been driving the car and lost control of it on an ice-slick road. The doctors, she often told me darkly, had begged her "to do away with you" for her health because she was "such a wreck," though she never told me *why*

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she was such a wreck. In fact, though she was heartbroken and heavily medicated, she never lost her determination to have the child she was bearing.

It seems likely to me that much of my nervous nature comes from absorbing my parents' years of sorrow and their sense that the world was out to kill me as it had their first child. They hovered over me, watched me while holding their breath, waiting for the world to reach out and snatch me from them. *Stop, look, and listen!*, my parents hammered into me, echoing the safety phrase that I was taught at school. From their worry, their fear, their sense—no, their *experience*—that the world was dangerous, I learned always to be on guard. As far back as I can remember, I remember being afraid. I lived at DEFCON 1. My nervous system was always primed for fight or flight.

Like most people who live their lives afraid, I was angry. This was a side of sensitivity that the poets, the books, and my teachers did not prepare me for. All those rhapsodies about the sensitive person's heightened responsiveness to the needs and desires of others never mentioned the inability to screen oneself off from the incursions of the world and the naked vulnerability with which one reacted to stimuli. I was sent to the psychologist because my yelling and sobbing disturbed my parents. Psychology helped a little. But what I really needed was quiet.

I've learned not to tear at my fingernails with my teeth. Or not too much. I avoid crowds where I'd have to fight to get into jammed public restrooms, and since I'm not a gadabout, this isn't much of a sacrifice. I've learned to accept that my legs are going to twitch in public and that from time to time they are going to keep me awake, though I do hope that the neurological affliction doesn't get worse. But sound still drives me mad.

Noises kept me up at night, noises that it seemed only I could hear: my brother breathing in the bed next to me, the cuckoo clock in the den on the other side of the house, the dripping shower I could hear through two closed doors. When my mother gave me a clock as a present, the ticking, which no one else noticed till I pointed it out, drove me to despair. I'd lie awake, the thunderous ticks thudding against my head, till I wept.

"Well, if it's bothering you," my mother said, "just stick it in your sock drawer every night."

I did what I was told, not only at night but also in the evenings when I was trying to read or do my homework. What I did not tell my mother was that I could still hear the accursed thing through the closed drawer. So I devised an elaborate nest of socks and underwear that baffled the noise in all directions. Every morning I took the clock, against which I now bore a personal animus, out of the drawer and set it back on the dresser so my mother would not think I was ungrateful for her gift.

My brothers noticed this. They also quickly discovered that by tapping on the table or whistling softly they could agitate me to almost uncontrollable rages, and if I struck out at them, I was of course in the wrong.

"Mom, Andrew hit me and I wasn't doing nothing."

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After my first attempt to tell my parents that I was being provoked, I found it easier to take my spanking in silence than try to explain that Roger had been, say, making rhythmic sucking noises through his teeth and watching me closely in order to enjoy my agitation. If you can't flee, if you're trapped in the car while your brother pops his gum and grins hugely in your direction, all you can do is try to ignore him.

"If you let him know it bothers you, he'll just keep doing it," Mom said, accurately enough. The damn pops were smacking against my head like blows, as if he were physically hitting me, and he knew it. I was quivering. Tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes. Sometimes I'd ask him, "Would you please not do that?"

He'd look at me, smirk, pop the gum, and say, "Do what?"

"That."

Pop.

"What?"

"Pop your gum."

"Oh, I didn't realize I was popping my gum. Is it bothering you?"

Pop.

"You knew it was getting on my nerves. That's why you did it."

"No it wasn't."

"Yes it was."

So I punched him. It seemed reasonable. Wasn't he, in a manner of speaking, attacking me?

That's what it felt like, an attack. Things that didn't bother other people, things that they barely noticed, if they noticed them at all, felt like blows to me; and if someone hits you, he knows what he's doing—or so it seems to the person being attacked. Under the constant battering, I fought with my brothers, screamed at my mother, huddled on the bed with my pillow pulled tight over my head, my body shuttering with sobs from the beating I was taking.

But why was I experiencing as assault what others took for granted as the normal wear and tear of the world? Was I crazy? Certainly I did things that *seemed* crazy. In college, when my downstairs neighbor cranked up his stereo so loud that my door rattled in its jambs, I finally, at midnight, went down and asked him if he would turn it down. He sullenly agreed. At one o'clock, he cranked it up again. For an hour I seethed and tried to sleep. And from two in the morning till four I pounded on my floor with a baseball bat like an insane man, sobbing with exhaustion and anger. I didn't stop till he turned off his stereo.

I don't always require hours of noise to go over the edge. In the early days of our marriage, if my wife was emptying the dishwasher, clinking plates together as she stacked them on the shelf, I tried to ignore the noise.

Clink.

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If I just concentrate on the newspaper, I won't hear it. It'll bother me only if I let it bother me.

Clink.

It won't last long. Just hold your temper. She'll be finished soon. Normal people aren't affected by plates scraping against each other two rooms away. Pretend you're a normal person.

Clink.

Finally, I stalked into the kitchen and snarled, "Why are you doing this to me? You know it drives me crazy." I understood, of course, that she wasn't trying to bother me, but my held-down rage built until I capitulated to the first rising certainty that she was provoking me on purpose. All my control deserted me and I had to stop the noise, now!—though I knew that my snarling would cost us both a harsh thirty minutes as she, hurt and tearful, told me that she didn't know how I could get so upset over a few clinks or how I could think she would deliberately do anything to bother me. And I, remorseful, would have to explain how I understood all that, but that to me each scrape of dish against dish was like a blow to the head. I've since learned that sensitivity to noise is called hyperacusis, and that one of the most irritating sounds to people who suffer from it is that of one dish striking another. That knowledge helps, a little.

In the books I read, *sensitive* was clearly a positive word, a word denoting discriminating intelligence and heightened alertness to other people. To be sensitive was to be better, different. But I didn't want to be different. I didn't want to stand out. I didn't want the responsibility that might be incumbent on me if I were superior to other people. And of course it turns out that I was worrying needlessly.

The other side of the coin, the real reason I didn't want to be different, was the possibility that I was inferior to other people. As far as I could tell, very few other people were as much at the mercy of their nervous systems as I was. But was it my body or my mind that was out of control? Was a diseased mind making my body twitch, or was my twitching raw nerve of a body driving me to distraction? I didn't know.

When I went on an Edgar Allan Poe kick in fourth grade, I was intrigued and appalled by the hyperacuity of Roderick Usher's senses in "The Fall of the House of Usher." It was the closest thing to my own sensitivity that I'd ever heard of, and even as a boy I understood that it was a manifestation of Usher's madness. Here's the passage from the story that I mooned over, trying to discern if I was destined to end up like Roderick Usher:

> He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but few peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

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I studied this sentence as if it it had been a real psychological checklist. I was okay on the food thing, though once I had to sit at the table for two hours after supper because the canned asparagus Mom had served, and was proud to have afforded, had a stringy texture that revolted me. I couldn't hold a bite in my mouth without retching, no matter how hard I tried. I had no phobia about light, but the milk always smelled and tasted bad to me half a day before my parents or my brothers complained. And, of course, rough fabrics—sometimes even oxford cloth—felt like sandpaper. Still, these weren't really problems.

But I ached for poor Roderick's "morbid acuteness" of hearing. You can close your eyes or the shades if the light bothers you. You can change shirts if your skin is unable to bear the rasp of cotton. But when you are assailed by noise, all you can do is flee. Flee, or stay and go crazy.

I was pleased to know that someone else understood my problem, even in an extreme form, though I was aware that during the story the narrator twice uses the word *hypochondriac* to describe Usher. And though I knew that both Roderick and his afflictions were fictional, I was also aware that they had led him to a bad end. Was I going to end up like Roderick or the speaker in Poe's "The Raven," driven mad by the real—or was it imagined?—insistent tapping at his chamber door?

I was as terrified as any of Poe's narrators that I was going insane. My weeping and rage left me feeling I was inhabited by forces that were not me, though they controlled me, at least partially. And worse, to everyone else they *were* me. How else do you judge someone except by how he acts? The conflict between the outer me who acted one way and the inner me who was distressed by my actions was irreconcilable. When I was in sixth grade, a teacher who saw me sitting alone reading a book told me to put it down and go play dodgeball with the other kids. Furious with myself, fighting to keep my lips from trembling, I burst into tears. Why in hell couldn't I control them? And then I cried even harder because I saw from the horrified expression on the teacher's face, and from the way she abruptly walked off and left me sitting on the green bench with my book, that she thought she was dealing with a deranged child.

When the Bible was read to me, I was fascinated by the stories of demonic possession because I felt as if I were possessed by a malign energy that made me do things I had no desire to do. I dreamed of Jesus ordering the demons out of me. Like Legion, who inhabited the Gadarene demoniac, they would refuse. That is what demons do. They like the body they have taken. But Jesus would order them out. He would send them into the unclean swine, which would then gallop pell-mell over the cliff. I imagined with extraordinary clarity the pile of dead and twisted hogs heaped at the bottom of the cliff, and the demoniac laughing, glorying in the slaughter of the internal powers that had plagued him.

I knew, of course, that I was not possessed by demons, but it seemed a

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perfect and compassionate metaphor for how I felt: the way I was acting was not me. This understanding leads to a sense of detachment that has been one of my salvations. Standing outside myself, I can hold myself responsible for what I do while conceding the limits of my will. I can forgive enough of my craziness to keep functioning. Yet I have to admit that the part of me I don't want to accept is also undeniably me, and that knowledge has given me, from the time I was young, a love for the irresolvable complexities of life.

Madness was one of my fears. Death was the other. My fragility made death seem very near. "You're such an old man!" my mother would say when I was afraid to jump off the roof with the other boys, or swim in the deep end of the pool. Because I liked to keep my books stacked tidily and my blue socks precisely matched, she'd say, "What an old maid you are!" Ah, so age and infirmity, with their intimations of mortality, were other things that went along with being sensitive.

"The canary in the cage" was another thing she called me. That one stopped me.

"Why am I the canary in the cage, Mom?"

Now she got careful. "Miners used to take a canary in the cage with them. The canary was so sensitive it would let the men know if the air was dangerous."

She did not tell me that the canary issued its air-quality advisory by dying, but I found that out soon enough, and it bothered me. Was my job to die? People who were called sensitive—including Poe's narrators and Poe himself—seemed to come to an early end. The only other group of people that I'd heard of who were routinely labeled as sensitive were poets, especially the Romantic poets, not a cohort famous for longevity. I decided that I too would probably die young, which saddened me because I possessed none of their gifts or glories. So dedicated was I to this understanding that only when I reached my late twenties did I realize that I was strangely healthy beneath my surface tics and was likely to live a normal span of years.

When I first read in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* of the satyr Marsyas, who challenged Apollo to a flute-playing competition, I was fascinated. For his hubris, Marsyas was flayed. I lingered with a boy's morbid curiosity over that new word *flayed*—skinned alive. What must that have been like? I didn't follow the image too far. It was too morbid, too grisly, even for me, but I loved its symbolism: stripping away the protective barrier between oneself and the world, which would of course kill you. Similarly, I was riveted when in junior high I dipped into Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and happened upon this passage about the emperor Valerian, who, in perhaps the single most devastating disgrace to Roman arms, was defeated by the Persians under King Sapor and captured:

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> We are told that Valerian, in chains, but invested with the Imperial purple, was exposed to the multitude, a constant spectacle of fallen greatness; and that whenever the Persian monarch mounted on horseback, he placed his foot on the neck of a Roman emperor. Notwithstanding all the remonstrances of his allies, who repeatedly advised him to remember the vicissitude of fortune, to dread the returning power of Rome, and to make his illustrious captive the pledge of peace, not the object of insult, Sapor still remained inflexible. When Valerian sunk under the weight of shame and grief, his skin, stuffed with straw, and formed into the likeness of a human figure, was preserved for ages in the most celebrated temple of Persia; a more real monument of triumph than the fancied trophies of brass and marble so often erected by Roman vanity. The tale is moral and pathetic, but the truth of it may very fairly be called in question.

I lingered over this passage, but I quailed. Anthony Hecht does not. In college, when I first read Hecht's "Behold the Lilies of the Field," I was transfixed with horror by the lines in which a man tells a psychiatrist about his mother, a social hypocrite who pretends to like people and things that she really doesn't. To her son, "she had lost all sense of honor." Suddenly, the same son speaks from the point of view of a captured Roman legionnaire forced to watch the flaying of Valerian:

> They began at his feet.
> And we were not allowed to close our eyes
> Or to look away. When they were done, hours later,
> The skin was turned over to one of their saddle-makers
> To be tanned and stuffed and sewn. And for what?
> A hideous life-sized doll, filled out with straw,
> In the skin of the Roman Emperor, Valerian,
> With blanks of mother-of-pearl under the eyelids,
> And painted shells that had been prepared beforehand
> For the fingernails and toenails,
> Roughly cross-stitched on the inseam of the legs
> And up the back to the center of the head,
> Swung in the wind on a rope from the palace flag-pole;
> And young girls were brought there by their mothers
> To be told about the male anatomy.
> His death had taken hours.
> They were very patient.

I was not so callow as to think that my nervousness approached the misery of the mythological Marsyas or the real Valerian, who probably was not, in fact, flayed alive. Or of the patient who finds his mother's social hypocrisies so besmirching as to evoke the disgrace of Rome. Without be-

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ing entirely aware of what I was doing, I was probing the simile: to be sensitive to the world is to be without a skin, without a defense against sensory stimuli. When I was under control, I saw the gap between simile and metaphor—the difference between saying two things resemble one another and saying that they are identical. But when I was in the grip of my inflamed nervous system, I capitulated, though with shame at my own melodrama, sentimentally confusing my nervous conditions with the torments of the flayed.

So I was gratified when I found that the psychological term—or one of them, anyway—for what I histrionically thought of as being without a skin is "defective stimulus barrier." Theories abound as to why some people suffer from this pathology. The psychoanalyst Leo Bellack, building on Freud, speculates that an individual's stimulus barrier may be constitutionally defective; or a mother may have overstimulated a baby during the period before he was able to develop his own stimulus barrier; or perhaps the overstimulation occurred while he was still in the womb. Such theories make sense in my case: my mother and the car accident. More recent theories say that exposure to a single loud noise can oversensitize the ear, as can a smack on the head. And I suffered from those, too. Who hasn't? However I came by it, I came by it. And it's clearly not going anywhere, so I've had to learn to deal with it. I remember the exact moment I understood that.

In my senior year of college, I was sitting in my father's Naugahyde recliner watching TV while my mother ragged me about how I didn't love my brothers, didn't help around the house, and expected everyone to do things for me while I never did anything in return. Because I didn't know how to answer, and simply looked at her with a puzzled expression, the complaints turned general. I was a fundamentally flawed spoiled brat who cared only about himself. I was a failure as a human being.

For the last year my mother had been in constant pain, and agitated. The doctors had told her that she was fine, that her ills were psychosomatic. Within a year she would be dead of leukemia, as yet undiagnosed.

Baffled by her furious assault, I said, "Well, in school I learned that we are all products of nature and nurture. So whatever I am, you're responsible for it." I was just saying something to shut her up. But as soon as it came out, I was stunned at not just how nasty but how profoundly wrong that statement was. My teachers may have been right in some philosophical sense, but I realized that I was finally an adult and that I had to take control of myself to the extent that I could. My life might be largely determined by my genes and my upbringing, but by exercising will, I could control some of it, too. Even if my will itself was limited by nature, I still had to do what I could to live as I wanted.

This mild and highly qualified Nietzscheanism is something that I've often observed in the weak. The successful disabled people I've worked with possess a toughness of mind that is refreshing at times and at other times

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almost Darwinian in its brutality. Once I asked a highly accomplished blind friend why some blind people rock back and forth when they are seated. Do they use the motion to keep themselves oriented? To locate their bodies through movement since they can't do it through sight?

"That's part of it," she said. "That and the fact that their parents didn't beat them enough when they were little to make them stop." Her voice was full of loathing for sloppy parents who let undisciplined children make spectacles of themselves in public. I understood—and she did too, of course—that she was projecting her own great discipline on other people in a way that might not have been entirely appropriate, but neither was it wrong. It had worked magnificently for her.

I have tried to bring that same useful brutality to bear on myself. When I was in high school I was invited to drive to Atlanta with some friends. I'd never traveled without my parents, and before the trip I stayed awake all night, mortally certain that I was going to die on the highway. But I bullied myself into going: People die all the time. Big deal. Who cares if you die? Normal people take trips with their friends, and you are going to act like a normal person even if it kills you. What's your life worth if you can't even do something as simple as this?

Later in life, I've been convinced that the airplane I was about to board was going to crash. I boarded it anyway, and I'm inordinately proud of the fact that the people seated around me could not see how nervous I was—except on my first flight. When the plane hit an air pocket and dropped steeply, I yelped out loud and then retched into the airline's vomit bag, to the embarrassment of the woman who is now my ex-wife and of all the other people around me. (Point of information: when you yelp and vomit noisily on an airplane, no one will make eye contact with you for about twenty minutes.) In order to embrace life, I first had to embrace death. I've therefore wasted, I'm afraid, a considerable amount of courage on surmounting the ordinary.

In college, when I first heard of Marcel Proust and his cork-lined room, my first thought was not, as it was for the other students in the class, "God, that's really weird," but "What a great idea! I wonder if it would actually work." Before I'd ever read a word of *In Search of Lost Time,* I read a biography of its author, hoping not to find out why he had retired to that room—I knew that—but how it was constructed and if cork worked.

I have found a less complicated alternative to cork: I had double-paned, argon-gas-filled windows installed in my house, and I run an air purifier on high around the clock. When it's blasting its airy white noise, I often can't hear the telephone's electric blat, the doorbell's chime, the dog's asthmatic rasp—not to mention the neighbor's yappy terrier, traffic on my busy street, children shouting as they play hide-and-seek, or trains that blast their air horns as they grind through the crossing two miles away. These tools—insulated windows and air cleaner—are far superior to my old standbys, foam

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earplugs and a standing box fan, which became uncomfortable in the winter, even when it was pointed at the wall. The drugstore, I've noticed, sells a lot of earplugs, sleep masks, and white-noise makers. There must be a lot of people who are normal in the same difficult way that I am.

Those are the practical steps I have taken, and they help. Socially, I've developed a peculiar approach. My wife told me that people who first meet me do not think of me as sensitive. They find me raucous, a joke teller, a tease, a gossip. This is not without design. In junior high I became fascinated with the biographies of the great comedians of the forties and fifties—Fred Allen, Jack Paar, Woody Allen, Sam Levinson, Alan King. As weak, unathletic boys, they made a place for themselves in high school by being funny, especially if they mocked themselves. It seemed a good way for me to go, too. I learned how to take my own contempt for my infirmities, combine it with wit, and preempt other people's crueler jokes. And I could do it in a way that apologized for my differences while asserting them. It gave me a place to stand, though at the cost of sometimes not being taken seriously when I've wanted to be. Maybe I've been too successful as a joker. It's hard to get the balance right.

Some years ago, I answered the phone one night and heard my brother and my sister-in-law laughing so hard they were almost incapacitated. They could barely gasp out what they had found so funny. They had decided I was Frasier, the comically overwrought television character played by Kelsey Grammer. I laughed with them, only a little grudgingly. Though it doesn't make me especially happy to be perceived as a comic figure, I'll take it. It beats being seen as one of Tennessee Williams's neurasthenic sad sacks, like Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* or Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—a possible resemblance that had tormented me for a long time. More briefly, I entertained the fear that I'd turn out to be an enervated aesthete like Proust, or like Des Esseintes in J.-K. Huysmans's *Against the Grain*, a character who withdraws from life to his exquisitely decorated rooms, complete with a gilded and bejeweled pet tortoise, the recherché gemstones on its shell chosen to harmonize with the colors of the carpet. I could well imagine myself rejecting diamonds (too obvious) and topaz (too common) as I ornamented *my* turtle. Yes, only Ceylon cat's-eyes, cymophanes, and sapphirines would provide the exact shades of green I needed to bring out the highlights in *my* carpet. But I was hindered not just by the finicky superficiality of the aesthete but also by the fact that I didn't know what a cymophane was, and I couldn't make myself care. If I must choose whether to be a comic eccentric, a Poeian madman, a Southern neurasthenic, or a fin-de-siècle aesthete, I choose the first, to the extent that choice is possible.

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The Porch

KATE BARNES

The willow through whose leaves the full moon
rose all summer stands at one end
of the porch. At the other end,
the lawn falls away to a wood where thrushes sang
through the summer evenings. But now,
on this cold morning in October,
I walk back and forth gazing out at a frieze
of bare branches. What leaves remain
hang at the ends of their twigs. The trees
are falling asleep quietly. The grass
goes on growing green without the least
foreboding.
I speak to my own
turbulent spirit about how Blake
wrote that eternity is in love
with the productions of time. "And so am *I!*"
it answers. Then tears well up
as I feel how entangled I am, and remain,
in a passion for individual things, just
as they are, the hanging leaves,
the grass, the old pear tree
grown twisted and hollow, the tin weather vane
on the barn—a galloping horse—the friends
who let their vulnerabilities flow
into my own, the one cow moose
who lives, I know, in the gully
at the back of these fields. Walking up and down
the length of the porch, I often imagine
that I can see her
stepping through the thicket along the streambed
in her lonely majesty, awkward and beautiful,
her great nose wrinkled up to browse,
her modest eye looking back into my own.

Kate Barnes, Maine's first poet laureate, won the 1999 American Scholar Best Poem Award for "Lines Beginning with an Anacreontic Fragment." Her new book of poetry, *Kneeling Orion*, will be published next year by David Godine.

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James as Jilter

Absenteeism in Washington Square

CYNTHIA OZICK

Henry James came to Paris in the bright autumn of 1879, intending to enjoy a visit with Turgenev and then go on to Florence. But early in December a ferocious blizzard assaulted northern Europe; the roads to Italy were closed off, and Paris lay encased in alpine snow drifts. Confined to the snug fireside of his hotel room, James wrote—in one sitting, almost fifteen thousand words!—the slyly comical little "international" tale, "A Bundle of Letters," which scrambled Americans abroad in a mix of bewildered Europeans. Though James was by now permanently settled in London, traveling intermittently in France and Italy, America was never far from his reflections. During the previous September he had completed his long study of Hawthorne, with its notorious condemnation of his native land:

> No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot!

So many "absent things," he concluded, "upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling." All this implied that James—an expatriate, after all—was equally appalled at how

Cynthia Ozick is a member of the SCHOLAR's Editorial Board. Her essay collections include *Quarrel & Quandary* and *Fame & Folly;* her most recent novel is *The Puttermesser Papers.* This essay is adapted from her introduction to Henry James's *Washington Square,* to be published this fall by Modern Library.

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little America had to offer his own imagination. Yet in the same essay he tellingly qualified these objections: "It is on manners, customs, usages, habits, forms, upon all these things matured and established, that a novelist lives—they are the very stuff his work is made of." Such stuff, he argued, could be found even in America: "The American knows that a good deal remains." In the winter of 1880, sheltered from the storms of Paris, he conceived his most American fiction—a novel of manners and customs, altogether barren of castles and ivied ruins, and set mainly in the front parlor of a New York brownstone in the early decades of the nineteenth century. He named it *Washington Square,* after a neighborhood redolent of his own childhood. Veering from the grain of the narrative in chapter 3, and invoking memory and reverie in a "topographical parenthesis," he recalls that it was in this place long ago, "as you might have been informed on good authority,"

> that you had come into a world which appeared to offer a variety of sources of interest; it was here that your grandmother lived, in venerable solitude, and dispensed a hospitality which commended itself alike to the infant imagination and the infant palate; it was here that you took your first walks abroad, following the nurserymaid with unequal step, and sniffing up the strange odor of the ailanthus trees which at that time formed the principal umbrage of the Square, and diffused an aroma that you were not yet critical enough to dislike as it deserved; it was here, finally, that your first school, kept by a broad-bosomed, broad-based old lady with a ferule, who was always having tea in a blue cup, with a saucer that didn't match, enlarged the circle both of your observations and your sensations.

The digression is crucial. It points to a novel of absences—and not only of abbeys and thatched cottages. To write it, James absented himself from Paris, enduring a choppy Channel crossing, and returned to the confiding familiarity of his London flat. It was a stroke of self-possession. What he possessed, or repossessed, were the decisive absences of his own life: the Washington Square of his small boyhood, ripe for retrieval; America, willed into absence, except for the distant yet persistent pressure of his relations. William, James's older brother—older by more than a year—had recently married. Contemplating the urgent absence of such an eventuality in his own future, James congratulated the new husband with a brother's cautious defensiveness and a novelist's enlarging empathy: "I believe almost as much in marriage for other people as I believe in it little for myself—which," he added, "is saying a good deal."

He believed in matrimony (and its absence) also as a primary subject for the novel as a form: the novel of usages and habits. Of the four major presences, and one minor one, who govern the action of *Washington Square,* three are widowed, and much the worse for it. Dr. Sloper is embittered because he has lost a rich and beautiful and clever wife who has left him a plain and

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unprepossessing daughter. Mrs. Penniman, the doctor's widowed sister, childless and unoccupied, expends her store of perilous energy on intrigues and flighty romancings. Mrs. Montgomery, the minor presence, a respectable young widow with many children, lives tidily on little money, burdened by a ne'er-do-well brother. For all these deprived persons, the novel—like its author—admits to a belief in the social advantages of matrimony. Had Dr. Sloper's wife not died, he would have continued to enjoy an adored and sprightly companion; as it is, he has only Catherine, the daughter he regards as irredeemably dull. Were Mr. Penniman still alive, Lavinia Penniman's fantasies and shallow mischiefs might sufficiently divert her clergyman husband, who presumably was not averse to having a silly wife to wag a silver tongue at. As for poor Mrs. Montgomery, who knows how a robust man in the house would have disposed of Morris Townsend, her shamelessly sponging brother? All these long-absent spouses, and their clear domestic benefits, foreshadow the husband who will always be absent in Catherine's story.

Catherine Sloper, at twenty-two, is an heiress. Her father, by means of a strenuously fashionable practice, has grown rich; her dead mother, an heiress herself, was richer still. No wonder, then, that a decades-old Hollywood film made from *Washington Square*—Olivia de Havilland soberly regal in period silks—is melodramatically called *The Heiress.* The novel itself is melodrama, recognizably stereotyped in a venerably fixed pattern: a young woman courted by a blatantly charming fortune hunter, an angry father determined to thwart the match. Nor was James unaware of the well-trodden nature of his materials. "I am almost a father in an old-fashioned novel," he has Dr. Sloper say, and Morris Townsend, questioned about his prospects, is made to remark, "I have nothing but my good right arm, as they say in the melodramas"—authorial self-consciousness here awkwardly tripping on its skirts. James loses no time, moreover, in presenting the handsome suitor as an attractive but manipulative scoundrel; Morris Townsend's aims are evident nearly from the first. Even Mrs. Penniman's role harks back to the ancient typology of the meddlesome go-between. James's narrative schemes, especially those that touch on a marriage, often enough rely on similar melodrama. *The Portrait of a Lady,* which directly followed *Washington Square,* allows the heiress to wed the scoundrel, thanks to the machinations of the go-between. But Gilbert Osmond is a darkly sinister villain; Morris Townsend is as light and transparent as air.

At bottom, what can these acknowledged contrivances mean for James's art? What we call plot, and he called the fructifying "germ" of the tale, is mostly beside the point. Leon Edel, James's foremost biographer, informs us that James got the idea for *Washington Square* from an anecdote told to him by Mrs. Fanny Kemble, a celebrated actress of the time. "Her brother," Edel recounts, "had jilted an heiress when he discovered that her father

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would disinherit the girl." But James's sources went deeper than anecdote, or germ, or plot, and deeper surely than the classical arrangements of sentimental drama. It was the jilting that drew him—jilting as flight, a thing James knew well. Putting an ocean behind him, he had jilted America. Fearing the responsibility of tending sickness, he had in effect abandoned his much-loved but tubercular young cousin, Minny Temple, who begged to follow him to Europe. He periodically deserted Constance Woolson, a novelist (and admirer) with whom he kept up a secret friendship; he dreaded the possibility of misperception, hers or the world's. Convivial as he was, sympathetic as he might be, his public life was a series of subtly executed relinquishments and escapes—from attachments unwanted, from ministrations imposed (as when he angrily discovered that the best-selling Edith Wharton had charitably—and clandestinely—arranged for her publisher to transfer to James a portion of her own royalties). And once he was himself jilted, in a manner of speaking, through William's marriage—William, almost a twin, close in age, close in childhood experience, close in fraternal rivalry. (Edel calls it a "divorce.")

So *Washington Square,* written not long after that marriage, is not only about an actual jilting; it is—in terms of fictive form—an act of literary jilting. It is a novel through which James escapes from the melodramatic frame that engaged him—the archetypes of faithless suitor and unforgiving father, the old lore of innocence wronged. James exploits all of these, and then throws them over. Nor is it simply that he jettisons familiar bathetic tropisms. The frame itself is wrung free of expectation and twisted out of all recognition. There is neither relief nor release; the protagonists are chained to what their innate characteristics of mind have wrought. What begins as melodrama ends as tragedy.

Dr. Sloper is a satirist. Under his cleverly penetrating eye, every object, every person, is bound to wither. His delight is to expose the truth, so long as the truth is hurtful. His sister fears him. His daughter reveres him. When the barbs fly, Catherine is mild, meekly withdrawing; it will be a long time before she can admit to her father's cruelty. She cannot satisfy him. No one, he tells himself, "will ever be in love with Catherine. . . . Poor Catherine isn't romantic." She lacks brilliance, she lacks taste; or, rather, a taste akin to his own: "It made him fairly grimace, in private, to think that a child of his should be both ugly and overdressed." He thinks this "in private," but aloud he is brutal. At a party, observing his daughter's lavish dress, he exclaims, "Is it possible that this magnificent person is my child?" And then, still more cuttingly: " You look as if you had eighty thousand a year."

He is not alone in this evaluation. Morris Townsend, catching sight of the plain young woman in the dress heralding eighty thousand a year, glimpses an opportunity. But if he is a mercenary adventurer, he is something else as well: he can entertain, he can amuse, he can entrance. By way of approaching Catherine, he charms Mrs. Penniman, a woman who is too eas-

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ily charmed. Dr. Sloper is decidedly not charmed. Until just lately, Morris "had been knocking about the world, and living in queer corners"; at present he is living with, and on, his needy sister. His manner is facile, his conversation sprightly:

> Catherine had never heard anyone—especially a young man—talk just like that. It was the way a young man might talk in a novel, or, better still, in a play, on the stage, close before the footlights, looking at the audience and with everyone looking at him, so that you wondered at his presence of mind. And yet Mr. Townsend was not like an actor; he seemed so sincere, so natural.

It is Catherine who is sincere and natural. She is innately diffident, but she is also unassumingly direct. Toward her father she is adoring and humble. The skills of deception are far from her character. Her character: the shrewdly cynical Dr. Sloper believes he is in command of her every trait and limitation—"poor Catherine isn't romantic." And further: "He had moments of irritation at having produced a commonplace child." Yet the unromantic and commonplace child is, despite all, attracted to imaginative influence; she senses that Morris is exactly this—a work of art. When she looks at him she is reminded of novels and plays, of paintings and sculpture:

> He had features like young men in pictures; Catherine had never seen such features—so delicate, so chiseled and finished—among the young New Yorkers whom she passed in the streets and met at dancing parties. He was tall and slim, but he looked extremely strong. Catherine thought that he looked like a statue.

Morris is a work of art; he is also an artist. Like a painter or a novelist, he can create a young woman who never before existed. He can transform Catherine, to whom no one has ever shown honest affection, into a woman who for the first time feels herself to be worthy of love. Always she has abided by her father's low valuation of a weak child without spirit. Morris enchants her with an unforeseen portrait, that of an effulgent figure capable of the ardors of happiness; he has fashioned her, for the moment, into yet another work of art—a golden bride in the morning of life.

Gold—the absence of gold—interferes. Dr. Sloper sees in Morris only the canny maneuvers of a man after money and ease. He abuses him unremittingly: Morris is "a vulgar nature," "extremely insinuating," "a plausible coxcomb," "a selfish idler." Coldly, he informs Catherine that he will disinherit her should she defy him by marrying Townsend. Whereupon Morris, persuaded finally of the force of this intention, disappears—precisely as Dr. Sloper, with all the power of practical intellect and well-tuned judgment, forewarned. But the doctor overlooks the power of joy. He discounts the

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power of art, however artfully proposed. He is blind to the power of beauty—his daughter's newly felt glory. He strips the commonplace child of the magnetically interesting husband she might have had—and what if Morris were made rich by the marriage, what is that to Catherine? And if rich and at ease, would he not be likely to remain kind? Might he not go on inventing her into something spirited and bold? The father, vindictive and dry, relegates the daughter's heart to barrenness and an absent future. He dooms her to a semblance of widowhood—to a mourning as empty as his own. Henceforth, unloved, bereft, unaccommodated, confined to her small domestic parlor, she will become a small domestic Lear. A Lear made mute by smallness.

Who—or what—is to blame? Is it Mrs. Penniman, who by a thousand blandishments has encouraged Morris to believe that a softly importuning Catherine might prevail over her father's hard will? Is it the cavernous greed of an intransigent Morris, whose charms wear off as the money recedes? Is it Dr. Sloper, who places deadly prognostication over hope, and punishment over possibility? Is it Catherine herself, obstinate in her perilous trust? Is it the treacherous idea of the romance of art?

Or perhaps the fault lies in a different breed of art—not the seductions of a transfiguring imagination, but the far darker art of imposture. A harsh and relentless father impersonates a loving and protective parent; a fortune hunter impersonates a sincere lover; a flibbertigibbet aunt impersonates a reliable confidante. And Catherine, when Morris returns after years away, older but no better than before—Catherine for a few deceptive moments appears to him to be the passively quiescent Catherine he remembers. But this too is an imposture. She is fierce; she is strong; she is implacable. Her father is dead, she is rich and unmarried, and Morris, prompted yet again by Mrs. Penniman, once more comes a-courting. Long ago he had reinvented Catherine by pledging her joy. In the wake of abandonment she has reinvented herself—in her father's remorseless image. With quick cruelty she dispatches her belated suitor: the jilter jilted.

But climax is anticlimax. There is no satisfaction in it. *Washington Square* is a novel about the abuse of imagination, the abuse of trust, the abuse of propriety and form; about, above all, the absence of pity. When James spoke of those "manners, customs, usages, habits, forms, upon . . . [which] a novelist lives," he was not unaware that it is on their rupture that a novelist can also—and still more vividly—live. Though it may be a bad thing to break the rules of a fixed society (disinheritance of a child is such a breach, jilting is such a breach), it is a worse thing to break a heart. Whether Dr. Sloper or Morris Townsend is the deeper miscreant is, in the end, a toss-up. Is it always right to be right? Will a wrong motive always do harm? And what are we to think of the secret susceptibilities of the novelist who sets this tale of tragic desertion in the weedy-smelling ailanthus streets of his own childhood, and in the country he himself deserted? "Morris, Morris, you must never despise

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me!" Catherine is made to cry. Can it be that this is what Henry James heard America whisper in his ear—that he must never despise what he had abandoned?

Shadowy complexities like these aside, *Washington Square* is among James's most exquisitely proportioned shorter masterpieces. "There is no living novelist," Virginia Woolf wrote in 1905, "whose standard is higher, or whose achievement is so consistently great." Her single reservation—she was reviewing *The Golden Bowl,* a work of James's "late style"—attached to what she called his "overburdened sentences," "trivial instances of detail which, perpetually insisted on, fatigue without adding to the picture. Genius would have dissolved them, and whole chapters of the same kind, into a single word."

No such stricture can be applied to *Washington Square* (nor, a century after Woolf's impatient complaint, does anyone any longer doubt James's genius). There is no possibility of reader's fatigue in Catherine Sloper's story. Every line, every paragraph, every chapter, is a fleet-footed light brigade, an engine of irony; and the charged wit of the dialogue is equal to Jane Austen's in another celebrated novel of manners and customs, one similarly concerned with getting a young woman married. *Pride and Prejudice* (its preliminary title was *First Impressions*) is a comedy of thwarted courtship that ends in jubilation. Everyone knows its sparkling opening, a sentence incised in literary history, signaling bright vitality: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." But (given custom and habit) reverse the sexes—and choose the earlier title—and the brilliantly lit comedy is gone; you have Catherine and Morris. The final note of *Washington Square,* a kind of codicil, is dour and dire and unforgettable. It too has left its lasting signal—that of a light growing dimmer: "Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlor, picking up her morsel of fancywork, had seated herself with it again—for life, as it were." The muted fading of that "as it were"—a nuanced gesture typical of James—stands for the snuffing of the light. Even a small and unsung Lear may be consigned to darkness.

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Thoreau Eats an Apple

JEFFREY HARRISON

The first bite with its pungent spirit
pierces his inner cheek
where the root of the tongue and the jaw's hinge
meet, an acid sting lingering
and spreading through the working muscle
a pleasurable ache as he takes
another bite and breathes in
the chill November air, which,
he will write later in his crabbed
handwriting, is the sauce
the wild apple must be eaten with.
Indoors, it would seem too harsh,
"sour enough to set a squirrel's teeth
on edge and make a jay scream."
But here in this lapsed pasture strewn
with gnarled windfalls, each chunk
snaps off as crisp as the day itself
so that he seems to be eating an essence
of the season, feeding himself
on something evanescent
and celestial, unobtainable
from any store-bought Baldwin or
imported Cuban orange.

Jeffrey Harrison's third book of poems is *Feeding the Fire*.

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The Legend of Christopher Columbus

GRACE MARMOR SPRUCH

In elementary school, I was taught that everyone thought the world was flat until Columbus proved it was round. I'm sure you were told the same thing, and ten years ago it was still being taught. I know that because every year I ask my college class of eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds if they were taught it, and they say they were. Hardly a scientific survey, I admit, so I enlarged it to take in a few assorted Europeans. Of Italians one might expect the same Columbus story, but Germans? They'd been taught it, too.

I became uncomfortable with the story years ago, when I began teaching one of those physics-for-poets courses that were popular for a time. Mine, which I called Physics as a Liberal Art, was basically a history of the great ideas in physics. In searching for background information, I came across some intriguing facts.

The ancient Greeks, for instance, knew the world was round. One of them, Eratosthenes, in the third century B.C., even measured its circumference in a simple, brilliant, elegant way that I am compelled to share with anyone who doesn't know about it, because all that's required is a bit of the Euclidean geometry that we learned in high school. But before Eratosthenes could be motivated to measure the earth's circumference, he and his compatriots had to believe the world was round. Aristotle tells us they did, based on a few commonsense observations. One is an experience of travelers going north: they see stars ahead of them that they had not seen at home, and lose sight of some that had been familiar. That would not occur on a flat earth, where the entire heavens would be spread

Grace Marmor Spruch, Professor of Physics at Rutgers University, Newark, is author of *Squirrels at My Window*. Her most recent SCHOLAR essay was "Nobel Tics" (Autumn 2000).

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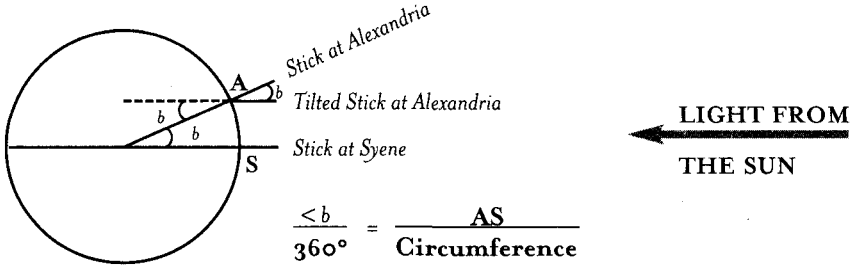
out above everyone, everywhere, on the earth's surface. It is our planet's curvature that obscures some stars. We in the United States are deprived of the Australians' Southern Cross, while they must make do without the Little Dipper, which contains our North Star, Polaris.

Aristotle's observations were restricted to the heavens. An observation that may be closer to home, especially a home near the shore, is what happens to a sailboat as it heads out to sea. On a clear day, we lose sight of the hull while the sail remains visible. Then the sail gradually disappears, bottom first, then the middle, finally the top. The entire sailboat doesn't suddenly go plop off the edge of the earth.

Another Aristotelian observation is the shape of the earth's shadow on the moon during an eclipse. The Greeks knew that a lunar eclipse comes about when the sun is on one side of the earth and the moon is on the other, so that the earth blocks light from the sun and casts a shadow on the moon. The shape of the shadow is round for a round earth. If the earth were, say, a flat disk, like a quarter, the shadow would be elliptical for all positions except full face against the light. If you're an experimental type, try it yourself with a light bulb and a quarter.

Eratosthenes was not only an experimental type, he was also a theorist. Here is his method for measuring the earth's circumference (with a bit of cheating in the interest of explanation—which won't affect the result, and I'll confess where the cheating came in). At noon on the summer solstice, the sun was directly overhead in Eratosthenes' city, Syene, so that a stick poked straight down into the ground cast no shadow; the upper part of the stick pointed directly at the sun. For a stick poked straight into the ground at noon in Alexandria—five hundred miles to the north and on roughly the same longitude—that was not the case. (Both were Greek cities in Egypt; Syene stood where Aswan is today.)

Poking straight into the ground means pointing to the center of a round earth, and pointing to the center in Alexandria means that the part of the stick above ground isn't pointing directly at the sun. Draw a circle to represent the earth, with a horizontal line across it for the equator. Think of the sun as very far away on the right, just over the equator, and extend the equator a little to represent the stick at Syene. Indicate Alexandria a bit north, and draw a radial line from there to the center, giv-



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ing you a pie shape on your circle. Show the stick at Alexandria as a small extension of the radius. If you want the stick at Alexandria not to cast a shadow, you have to tilt it toward the horizontal, to point at the sun. The angle through which you tilt turns out to be the same as the angle at the center of your pie, opposite the arc formed by the two cities. The angle at the center of the earth was the one Eratosthenes was interested in but couldn't measure directly. The angle of tilt and the angle at the center are the same for the reasons you once recited in geometry class: "Two parallel lines cut by a transversal have alternate interior angles that are equal," and "vertical angles [the ones on opposite sides of an X] are equal."

Knowing the angle at the center of the earth (by measuring the angle of tilt) and the distance between the two cities, Eratosthenes could set up a proportion: the angle at the center, *b*—about 7 degrees—is to the entire circle, 360 degrees, as the distance between the cities is to the entire circumference. The only unknown in the proportion, the circumference, could then be calculated. (As to my "cheating," Eratosthenes didn't use sticks; he used a deep well. But it's easier to describe the relationship between angles by tilting a stick than by invoking a deep well—an antistick. Also, Syene isn't right on the equator; but, as Eratosthenes recognized, the earth's axis is tilted, which compensates.)

So what does all this have to do with Columbus?

Well, if the Greeks knew the world was round, why did people of later times get bogged down in the idea of a flat earth? Was Greek enlightenment obscured by the gloom of the Dark Ages? Somehow that question got lost while I continued my dalliance with the Greeks.

They committed a few bloopers, of course, including one I still can't believe they took seriously. That was about how we see. Followers of Pythagoras (he of the theorem) thought something emanated from our eyes, hit the object we were viewing, and was reflected back. It's hard to accept that those clever Greeks—and others, later—subscribed to that hypothesis, because the logical corollary would be that such a mechanism would enable us to see in the dark! This was the source of "the evil eye": the idea that malicious thoughts are sent out along with whatever produces vision—the original "if looks could kill."

Another blooper was eminently understandable, even brilliant. It is related to our consideration of the shape of the earth. Though the ancient Greeks had a round earth, it was stationary, at the center of the universe. It's easy to imagine why they would put themselves at the center of the universe—we all have that tendency—but why stationary? One would think it more reasonable to have the earth turn so as to give night and day than to have the sun zip around the earth every day at incredible speed. But here's one explanation the Greeks gave for a stationary earth. Start with the earth turning on its axis. Now think of a tree on the equator moving through space because it's attached to the turning earth. What is the

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speed of that tree? Speed is the distance covered in a certain time (as in sixty miles per hour). The distance covered by the tree as the earth turns around once in twenty-four hours is twenty-five thousand miles: the circumference of the earth at the equator—which, thanks to Eratosthenes, the Greeks knew. So the speed is twenty-five thousand miles divided by twenty-four hours, or a little over a thousand miles per hour. The Greeks then asked, "What if a bird left her nest on the tree to snag a worm on the ground?" How fast do birds fly? Watching them, you might guess thirty miles an hour, maybe forty; a record-holder might exceed a hundred, but obviously couldn't reach anywhere near a thousand miles an hour. While the bird was in the air, therefore, the tree would rush away at a thousand miles an hour and the poor bird wouldn't be able to get back to her nest. But the Greeks could see birds returning to their nests. Therefore, they argued, the earth could not be moving.

You must admit that the argument makes sense—so much sense that the earth would be regarded as stationary for the next two thousand years. I'll be mean enough to leave it there, and not tell how Galileo later explained the birds' ability to get back to their nests. That really isn't part of our story.

The next stage in my flat-earth saga began with a letter from a grandfather. He wasn't *my* grandfather, and the letter wasn't written to me. It was addressed to the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers, and, by a route worthy of Columbus, it wound up in my mailbox. The letter entreated: "Please help me to answer this question posed by my grandchild. Since the earth is round and revolves, how is it that at all times everything seems to be in an upright position?" The writing was that of a man who was not uneducated, and it served to reinforce what I had learned from my students: the concept of gravity may be mouthed but is not always digested. My reply outlined how the force of gravity pulls everything on the surface toward the center of the earth, with the result that everyone on the surface experiences a "downward" pull. That is, the direction of the center of the earth is essentially the way we define "down," and away from the center is what we call "up." In a room, the floor is down, the ceiling is up; but out in space, with no floor or ceiling to the universe that we might use as a reference, it is harder to tell which end is up.

The letter started me wondering again about how the flat-earth concept gained currency, since, through Aristotle, Greek ideas on the shape and position of the earth had become part of church doctrine and had remained so throughout the Dark Ages. The lay view of the universe was the same, as can be inferred from Dante's circles in *The Divine Comedy.*

Then, one day, I came across a statement by the naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison that appeared to blame Washington Irving for the flat-earth theory! *Washington Irving?* What had he to do with anything outside Sleepy

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Hollow or the answer to the old chestnut, "Who was the first president of the United States, Max?" I recalled that Irving had written about New York, under the pen name "Knickerbocker." Yet New York is hardly the New World, the opinion of New Yorkers notwithstanding.

I will present my subsequent investigations in somewhat the same way that science textbooks trace the progress of a particular subject, from start to end in a straight line, omitting the zigs and zags, backs and forths, false starts, dead ends, and periods of just plain stumpedness. Historical investigation was new to me. I ask your indulgence if it is not new to you.

Let's start at the beginning of the Washington Irving phase: the opening paragraph of the preface to his *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus,* published in 1828.

> Being at Bordeaux, in the winter of 1825–26, I received a letter from Mr. Alexander Everett, Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States at Madrid, informing me of a work then in the press, edited by Don Martin Fernandez de Navarrete, Secretary of the Royal Academy of History, &c., &c., containing a collection of documents relative to the voyages of Columbus, among which were many of a highly important nature, recently discovered. Mr. Everett, at the same time, expressed an opinion that a version of the work into English, by one of our own country, would be peculiarly desirable. I concurred with him in the opinion; and, having for some time intended a visit to Madrid, I shortly afterwards set off for that capital, with an idea of undertaking, while there, the translation of the work.

Irving then went on to add that

> the sight of disconnected papers and official documents is apt to be repulsive to the general reader, who seeks for clear and continued narrative. . . . It appeared to me that a history, faithfully digested from these various materials, was a desideratum in literature, and would be a more satisfactory occupation to myself, and a more acceptable work to my country, than the translation I had contemplated.

Eureka! "A more satisfactory occupation to myself, and a more acceptable work to my country." Irving was a consummate storyteller, and he certainly told a story about Columbus.

Professor Morison, in his book on Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea,* describes as "pure moonshine" Irving's account of sessions at the university in Salamanca in which Columbus supposedly failed to persuade professors of mathematics, geography, and astronomy that the world was round. Morison does consider it a wonderful tale, though. To quote Irving: "An obscure navigator, a member of no learned institution, destitute of all

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the trappings and circumstances which sometimes give oracular authority to dullness, and depending upon the mere force of natural genius" argued his case for a round earth against the "monastic bigotry" of flat-earthers who "assailed him with citations from the Bible and the Testament: the book of Genesis, the Psalms of David, the prophets, the epistles and the gospels . . . the expositions of various saints and reverend commentators." Morison concludes that this "gripping drama" became a popular myth because people love to hear about experts being confounded by simple common sense.

In reality, the shape of the earth was not the issue. The serious thinkers of the time knew it was round. The actual subject of the Salamanca conferences was the width of the ocean. And on this point, says Morison, the opposition was right. Objections to Columbus's proposed voyage were reasonable. If the ocean proved wider than was thought, could his ships carry sufficient provisions for an extended voyage? (NASA has a similar concern when sending astronauts into space.) Worries about encountering monsters were also justifiable. There were big sea creatures out there. What was *not* a worry was falling off the edge of the earth.

The question, for me, then became: How much impact did Irving's biography have? Apparently it was immensely popular. To find out just how popular, I called Irving's publisher. G. P. Putnam's librarian apologized; the firm's sales figures did not go back to 1828. *Publishers Weekly,* the object of my next call, didn't publish reviews until 1872. After a few more dead ends I turned to a friend, an authentic historian, who steered me to *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus,* a book by William D. Phillips, Jr., and Carla Rahn Phillips, published on the five hundredth anniversary of his voyage of 1492. Not only did the book have the answer I sought, it had it in a form dear to my physicist's heart: numbers. Irving's biography was reprinted thirty-nine times in English and in fifty-one other languages before the author's death in 1859—one hundred and seventy-five full editions and abridgments, all told, between 1828 and 1900.

In "Discovering Columbus," an *American Scholar* essay published shortly after the five hundredth anniversary, Lilian Handlin traced attitudes toward Columbus as reflected in literary and historical sources through the centuries. The way "history" alters with time is rather shocking to non-historians. We tend to assume, as we do in everyday affairs, that the present state of things has been ever thus. What is standard for professionals can be an epiphany for the uninitiated. Handlin showed that Columbus had been "an irrelevancy" in this country before 1750, and that his voyage was celebrated sparsely, and only among select groups, when its three hundredth anniversary arrived in 1792. But nineteenth-century Americans recognized in Columbus the spirit of the frontier. Theirs was the era in which Irving published his book—one that Handlin calls the first full-scale modern biography in any language, and a narrative masterpiece,

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creating an image of Columbus that became dominant until the end of the century. "No debunkers," wrote Handlin, "and they were legion, succeeded in toppling the edifice Irving had constructed."

As the four hundredth anniversary of the voyage approached, some historians held that Columbus was being exploited in a conflict between science and religion. Later, Italian Americans would vie with Americans of Hispanic heritage in claiming Columbus as their own. Varying images of the Genoese navigator reflected religious, national, and ethnic pride and prejudice. (I once heard a member of a Norwegian society, a guest on a radio show, maintain not only that Leif Eriksson had arrived sooner than Columbus, but also that the latter was a rotten sailor who had run his ship aground.) By the five hundredth anniversary, as we all know, Columbus was being widely portrayed as an exploiter of natives, a despoiler of the environment, a dispenser of diseases.

In researching their book, the Phillipses reviewed two hundred and fifty history textbooks used in American schools during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They concluded that schoolbooks have rarely presented a balanced picture of Columbus. Nineteenth-century authors were more concerned with creating what we now call a role model than with presenting an accurate picture. This continued into the twentieth century. By the 1930s, a more critical attitude toward heroes was in evidence, and large historical forces received more emphasis than did individuals. Though these trends in historiography stimulated research, the Phillipses state, they did little to correct the old heroic notion of Columbus, or even to sustain the more rounded version of his life that had been current in the late nineteenth century. Citizens of the United States appeared to have lost, rather than gained, knowledge about Columbus since 1892, and most of the old misconceptions still held sway. Some were trivial, like Columbus Day posters that depicted the man peering through a telescope (which wasn't invented until a hundred years after he died). Others were more serious—like the myth that made him the only man of his day who believed in a spherical earth.

Somehow it seems unsporting to lay to rest Columbus and the flat-earth myth without mentioning the International Flat Earth Research Society—yes, there really is such an organization—and its president, Charles K. Johnson, whose obituary appeared in the *New York Times* a year and a half ago. Mr. Johnson, it seems, had doubted that the world was round since the time an elementary school teacher tried unsuccessfully to teach him about gravity. (See?) Johnson believed that the earth was a flat disk floating on primordial waters—a construct not unlike that of Thales, a sixth-century B.C. merchant who is often identified as the first of the ancient Greek scientists. Thales held that in order to understand the cosmos (a word implying order), it was necessary to know its nature, or *physis*

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(from which we get *physics*). Johnson based his concept on biblical references and what people can see with their own eyes. Scientists, he believed, were perpetrating a hoax in order to replace religion with science.

The *Times* obit added that the wife of the president of the Flat Earth Society shared her spouse's convictions, because "she did not hang from her toes in her native Australia." It also noted Johnson's name for Copernicus, the contemporary of Columbus who declared that the earth revolved around the sun, not vice versa. Johnson called him *Co-pernicious.*

Is it still Columbus versus the Flat Earthlings in *today's* textbooks? I extended my survey to Generation Z. One ten-year-old looked blank when I mentioned Columbus. Her mother explained that she attended an "alternative" school. I then cornered a neighbor's daughter and her friend. Both girls were pushing eleven. I asked if they'd learned anything about Columbus in school. "A little," both said. I pressed on and asked, "What did he do?" The friend took the initiative: "He sailed up the Hudson River, and . . . " Her associate nodded in agreement.

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Cleaning Rabbits

WALT HARRINGTON

A freshly killed cottontail rabbit lying on its side in the palm of a man's hand droops like a frown, the tips of the rabbit's toes reaching almost straight for the ground, its head cast back, ears perked up as if listening, teeth clenched, the fur beneath its neck and belly a lustrous white, eyes black and blank, its vibrant brown-gray coat specked with creamy stalks of fur visible only from closer than arm's length, its cottontail resembling a puff of real cotton. Sometimes the rabbit is mangled from the shotgun blast, and blood has dried in dark mottles on its fur, or its head is gone, or its rear legs are shattered and dangling in bony tatters. More often it looks as if it is simply sleeping in your hand. You can't even see where the bits of shot pierced the rabbit's skin and severed its heart's aortic arch or shattered its left atrium, killing it instantly.

Every November for nearly fifteen years, I've left my city life in Washington, D.C., behind and traveled to rural Glasgow, Kentucky, to hunt rabbits for a few days with my father-in-law, Alex, and his brother, Bobby, and their lifelong friends Lewis and Carl. The men were all raised in or near Glasgow, a country town that sits about halfway between Louisville and Nashville in a hybrid landscape of croplands, rocky terrain, and forest—a perfect habitat for rabbits.

No matter how many rabbits I clean, I must flick a switch in my mind, turn off the part of me that has had pet dogs and cats since I was a boy, played with my son's hamsters, slept with the tabby kitten curled next to my chest. If killing an animal with a gun is a loud announcement of moral choice, cleaning what I kill is a silent reflection on the consequences of my staying alive. I eat meat. I like meat. I rarely give its source a moment's

Walt Harrington was a writer for the *Washington Post Magazine* for nearly fifteen years. He now teaches literary journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This essay has been adapted from *The Everlasting Stream*, forthcoming this fall by Atlantic Monthly Press.

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thought. A steak on the table is so antiseptically distant from the farm cow with her moist, gazing eyes and her amiable amble.

I flick the switch.

"You notice that bottle hasn't been opened," I say as I hand Carl the Wild Turkey. I say that because Alex has a habit of filling empty Wild Turkey bottles with Early Times or Ten High or, once, something called Edgewater bourbon, and passing the cheap whiskey around, hoping the guys will say how good it tastes. He never reveals the bait-and-switch to them, but he'll tell me later and laugh and laugh about how the men can't tell expensive liquor from cheap. Sharing a bottle of whiskey with the men is an act of ceremony always undertaken with some pomp and circumstance. A few jokes about who will hog the bottle. A joke about how I will take the smallest sips, a friendly questioning of my masculinity. A man must learn to tip the bottle high for the theatrics while regulating the pinch of his lips to get the right dose. It took me a couple of years to figure out that although the men made much of their whiskey ritual, they never drank much. This morning, Carl's giant right hand envelops the cork. Everybody stops and watches in the way a family pauses in unison around the table to watch the first slice cut from a holiday turkey. With his left hand, Carl twists the bottle, and the cork audibly pops out in his palm. He chomps off a bite, smacks his lips, and passes the bottle to my seventeen-year-old son to pass to me. Matt, who has been hunting with us for several years, unexpectedly steals a quick slug—then lets out a long breath and a rough cough. The men laugh. I don't say anything, but I look at him with brows raised and mouth pinched.

"I earned it," Matt says. "I got a rabbit."

"One rabbit, one sip," Carl says.

Matt was four years old the first morning I reluctantly went hunting with the men. Alex got up early and cooked breakfast—scrambled eggs, grits, bacon, toast, and fried bull gonads. I'd never eaten bull gonads. Alex wanted to treat me to the country delicacy and, I suppose, see if he could make me squirm. They were good, tasted a little like mushy chicken livers. I was eating at the kitchen table when Matt walked sleepily out of the dark hallway into the light. At that age, he was still wearing pajamas with feet. He climbed onto my lap, put his head on my chest, and dozed. I finished eating and carried him back to bed. It went on like this for years, Matt always waking up on his own and coming into the kitchen. When he got a little older, he'd follow us out the door into the garage and watch us collect our coats and hats, fill our shell pockets, and hoist our shotguns onto our shoulders. I'd say something like "Take care of your mother" or "Why don't you walk your little sister out to see the cows later?"

Matt eventually took to saying, "Shoot me a rabbit, Dad."

That always made me feel good.

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A son at four years old is a nice age for a father. It's all glory. A friend, six feet five inches tall, once told me that when his son was four, the boy believed he had the tallest dad in the world. My friend was deeply saddened when his boy met a man who was taller. When Matt was that age, I was once driving with him to the hardware store. Out of the blue, he asked, "Sons can grow up to be their daddies, right, Dad?" I was careful in my response. No, I said, sons can't grow up to be their daddies. They can grow up to do the same work or to be like their daddies in some ways, but they can't *be* their daddies. They must be themselves. Matt would hear nothing of these subtleties. He insisted that his friend Justin would grow up to be his daddy and that he would grow up to be me.

"Sons *can* grow up to be their daddies!" he said defiantly. "They can!"

I didn't argue. It made me feel good.

My memory of those early years of our hunting mornings always ends when Alex and I walked out the door into the dark and Matt went back inside. When we returned four or five or six hours later, Matt always popped out the door just as we were climbing out of the trucks. He came with us to the barn and watched us skin and gut the rabbits and listened to us talk.

The men would tease Matt a little. They'd ask if he was enjoying his days off from school or if he'd gotten better at basketball this season. Mostly, he'd hang back outside the circle and stay quiet. He has always had intense dark eyes, and I could see him taking in the scene. I sometimes worried that watching animals get sliced to pieces, their innards tossed blithely into bloody buckets, might make a boy emotionally callous. I sometimes reminded him that beef and chicken and pork all start out alive. I mentioned that Alex, Bobby, Lewis, and Carl don't curse in polite company. I pointed out that taking a couple of slugs from a whiskey bottle was something I did only after hunting.

Really, I rolled the dice. I knew that most affluent city people would shield their sons from such rough men and gritty settings. But after my first few years of hunting, I decided that the forests, fields, wind, rain, moon, stars, leaves, weeds, guns, killing, blood, cursing, drinking—and, naturally, the men themselves—would be good for Matt. I can't tell you exactly what Alex, Bobby, Lewis, and Carl said and did that made me want Matt to join us. But I can tell you why. As a journalist, I had spent much of my life writing down people's words, jotting notes on their gestures and facial expressions, recording the brands of their shoes. I had become a professional observer. I had a journalist friend who was a decade or so older than I. He had taken a year off, packed his family into a van, and driven the length of South America.

"That would make a great story," I said when he told me about his year on the road.

"That's not what the trip was about," he said.

I had no idea what he meant, figured he'd gotten lazy in middle age. I'd

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like to apologize to him now. Hunting in Kentucky was becoming my trip to South America.

When Matt was maybe eight years old, we were walking out to the kennels one evening to feed the day's garbage to the hunting dogs. The sun was setting, and its glow on the autumn colors gave the whole scene an amber cast. The men and I had hunted that morning, and Matt, as always, had joined us afterward while we cleaned the rabbits and settled in for chatter and a drink or two. Matt and I walked along quietly. He seemed thoughtful.

"Dad," he finally said, "Grandpa and the guys don't always like each other, do they?"

"No, not always," I answered.

"But they're still friends, aren't they?"

"Yeah, they're still friends."

Matt smiled. "Kinda like you and mom."

It was my turn to smile. "Kinda like you and me."

If not at that moment, then pretty soon after, I decided I wanted Matt to hunt with us someday. I wanted him to know something beyond clowns and ponies at his birthday parties; every animated movie ever made; *Goodnight Moon* and *Where the Wild Things Are*; my Ford Taurus, everybody else's Chevy Suburban; Disneyland; sleep-away summer camp; trick-or-treating for UNICEF; cooking meals once a month at the homeless shelter; lessons in swimming, piano, and Suzuki violin. When we got back to Washington, I bought Matt a BB gun and taught him to shoot. Someday, I told him, he'd hunt with the men. I rolled the dice, and we have ended up on this Thanksgiving afternoon cleaning rabbits behind Bobby's barn.

Last year, Matt asked, "Dad, can you get this bladder? I'm worried about popping it." I told him to try it himself. He looked at the carcass in his hand as if it were a puzzle, turned it to see the bloated yellow sac from several angles, then moved in with his grandfather's knife.

"I got it," he said, as the sac fell into the gut bucket.

"Should I cut the tail off, too?" Matt asked.

"Yeah," I said, "but don't cut your finger."

Shouldn't have said that, I thought. *He knows not to cut his finger.*

Today I decide to buy Matt his own hunting knife.

I think about gutting the same way I think about cleaning up a sick child's vomit or diarrhea: I do it without squeamishness because it has to be done. I remember a time when Matt was sick as an infant, and I was holding him close to my face, trying to soothe him, when he vomited into my mouth and I swallowed before I could carefully put him down and get to a sink. I didn't even gag. It was part of life. Killing and eating an animal is part of life. I have little patience for people who believe it's brutish to clean an animal you are going to eat but fine to buy a hamburger cut from a steer

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someone else has butchered. Over the years, I've talked myself into believing that intellectually. Still, every time I go to clean a rabbit, I balk for an instant, and I wonder: *Is it weakness in me that I still feel guilt? Or is it my conscience telling me that hunting is wrong?* Then I flick the switch.

There is really no pleasant way to describe skinning and gutting an animal.

I stand back from the spigot behind Bobby's barn, take the rabbit's head in my right hand, hold its body firmly at its chest in my left hand, and twist as if I were opening a stubborn jar of pickles. There's a crunching sound as the rabbit's neck snaps. I yank the head away to break the skin at the neck and then discard the severed head in the gut bucket. I grab the ends of the rabbit's front and back legs and stretch the stiffening carcass to loosen it. I take it by the front legs, hold it before me, and shake. The rabbit's innards drop toward the rear of its abdomen, nearer to the ground.

I pick loose a circle of fur and skin at the last joints on the rabbit's front legs. Using finger and thumb, I pull the skin on each leg down to the rabbit's chest. I grab the loose skin in my right fist, lift my left hand, and, with a few gentle tugs, pull the rabbit's skin down to its tail. This makes a sucking sound something like pulling adhesive tape off your arm. When I do this, the rabbit's carcass is level with my eyes and a foot from my face. As if the skin were a winter parka, I slip the fur garment down over the rabbit's rear legs. Then I pluck off its cottony tail, which is dirtied with feces that stick to my fingers even after I shake my hand a few times. Carl can take his knife, put its blade at the last joint on each of a rabbit's legs, and, with his thumb on the other side of the joint, snap the bone and cut the skin in one flick of his wrist. I'm not strong enough to do that. I retrieve my knife from the fence post, lay my rabbit on a loose board, press to break through the joints, and toss each rabbit's foot into the gut bucket.

The naked carcass isn't very bloody. Rabbits have few blood vessels between skin and body and so don't bleed much when the skin is removed. Without the strong scent of hot blood, there is no nauseating smell. The carcass is glossy crimson where its meat is undamaged, and dark red, almost black, where gunshot wounds have made blood pour into tissue. At times I have thought a skinned carcass looks as fragile as a newly hatched bird. At other times I've thought it resembles nothing so much as a classical statue of a naked athlete, all muscle and sinew. I hold the carcass in my left hand with the rabbit's belly turned upward and its back legs hanging toward the ground, poke just the tip of my knife into the soft skin at the rabbit's rectum, and run the blade upward to the top of the rabbit's chest, exposing its organs and releasing an awesome stench. It took me years not to gag every time I sliced open a rabbit's belly.

A rabbit, like all mammals, is built pretty much like a human under the hood—the heart with outgoing arteries still bright red from oxygenated blood and ingoing veins dark with blood that was returning for a fill-up; lungs now collapsed like deflated pale balloons; stomach with gleaming gray

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leathery surface and filled with digesting greens; silky salmon pancreas; yards of serpentine small intestine; glands that only an hour ago secreted fear and flight into the rabbit when the dogs howled; and the damp, gauzy membrane that connects the uterus to the bladder and encases the red, pinprick-sized lobules that would have become eggs in the spring.

I shift my knife to my left hand, slip all the fingers of my right hand down behind the rabbit's heart, and sweep the wet organs, slurping as they go, out and into the bucket. Bits of organ stay behind and must be picked off the carcass like pieces of lint. The urine sac must be cut out carefully from behind. I break the bony pelvic bridge where a rabbit's back legs are fused into a single, powerful jumping machine, and remove the last bits of feces with my fingertips. During the Depression, when wild rabbits were called Hoover hogs and sold commonly as food, a rabbit's tailbone was always left so people could be sure they weren't getting a cat. I lay my rabbit on the loose board and cut off its tail. In the kitchen later, I'll slit the skin where blood has coagulated, so that soaking can disperse the viscous puddles. I'll search for pieces of shot buried in the meat by rubbing my fingers over the surface to feel for the tiny lumps, and cut them out. I'll pick off countless bits of fur that will have clung to the carcass. But I'm done for now. I lean over to the spigot, flush the inside of the carcass, rub it clean with my thumbs, put it in a plastic bag, wipe my hands on my pants, walk over to the tailgate of Carl's truck, and take a good hit of Wild Turkey.

For an hour, the men tell stories, mostly about long-deceased hunting dogs: Old Red, Leroy, Lead Foot, Head, Bingo, Queenie, Jack, Joe, Bo, Sue, Whitey, Trouble, and Gal. Matt listens. It's a long way from Suzuki violin. I rolled the dice. I hope it was for the better.

The time has come for us to head home for Thanksgiving dinners. The Wild Turkey is only half gone, and I make sure I get my hands on it before it grows legs. The men seem reluctant to call it a day. A gray moon, a waxing crescent—God's thumbnail, as my daughter calls it—has finally risen and is pasted against the blue sky. Carl is teasing Matt about something, and he's laughing. The men believe Matt has become a good shot but that he has a lot to learn about hunting protocol.

"You gotta learn like Carl and Bobby," Alex once told Matt. "Your first shot today, you didn't *miss*. You were turnin' the rabbit so you could get a better shot."

"Yeah," Matt said, "the first shot I took was to turn him. That's why I kicked up the dirt next to him. The next shot I nailed him."

"You're learning," I said.

"Learning what?" Matt asked.

"Excuses."

"No, really," he said. "I planned that turn. Honest."

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In Search of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

ROBERT EMMETT GINNA, JR.

My quest for the true *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* began years ago, when I ordered a copy of the screenplay by John Huston from Hollywood's Script City. I was teaching a course in film-script analysis, and I wanted my students to study the film for which Huston had received two Academy Awards, for screenplay and direction (and for which his father, Walter Huston, won an Academy Award as best supporting actor). When the script arrived I was perplexed; the title page read: "*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* / Screenplay by Robert Rossen / From the novel by B. Traven." At the bottom of the page were the words "First temporary white, January 1, 1947." On the last page of the photocopy was stamped: "Important. Return to Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. Story Department." The screenplay appeared to be authentic, and it corresponded in most respects to the film I admired. But here was a puzzle. No one I knew in films doubted that Huston had written the Oscar-winning screenplay. Were we all wrong?

Produced in 1947 and released in January 1948, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* has earned an enduring place among classics of American cinema. Reviewing it for *Time,* James Agee wrote, "*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (Warner's) is one of the best things Hollywood has done since it learned to talk, and the movie can take its place without blushing among the best ever made." Agee's judgment has been echoed by similar appreciations over the years, and the picture was among the first twenty-five American film classics selected for preservation by a commission created by Congress. I knew that my students could profit from close study of the screenplay and the film based on B. Traven's celebrated novel of the same title, first published in Germany in the late 1920s, and published in the United States by

Robert Emmett Ginna, Jr., has taught film and writing courses at Harvard since 1988. He has been a filmmaker himself; an editor of four magazines; editor in chief of Little, Brown and Company; and a contributor to many publications. He lives in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

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Alfred A. Knopf in 1935 (and still in print). But whose shooting script would we be analyzing? Why did the name of Robert Rossen—the well-regarded writer and director of such films as *All the King's Men* and *The Hustler*—appear on a screenplay bearing the same production date as the Warner Brothers film and the stamp of its story department?

To my query, Script City responded that the "shooting script" offered in their catalogue was the only version they had. Next, I compared this version credited to Rossen with that published by the University of Wisconsin Press: *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* screenplay by John Huston, with an introduction and commentary by James Naramore. Professor Naramore refers to the "final revised shooting script," dated "January 10, 1947, with changed pages to June 9, 1943." I could find virtually no differences in dialogue, description, construction, or length—each is 143 pages—from the version sold to me and my students. In his introduction, Naramore notes that "according to some references, Robert Rossen wrote an early draft of the adaptation, but I have not been able to see any versions prior to Huston's entry on the scene."

Rossen's daughter, Carol, told me she knew nothing of the matter, but obligingly passed me on to her brother, Stephen. He too expressed surprise when asked about his father's connection with *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* Robert Rossen had never mentioned it, nor had he left any evidence of his association with the film among the papers that Stephen had seen.

There is a trove of Warner Brothers films, scripts, and legal files in the University of Wisconsin's Center for Film and Theater Research; the studio's vast archives of "Historical Papers from the Beginning to 1967" were entrusted to the University of Southern California. I had barely begun excavating the USC papers when archivist Leith Adams tipped me off to the papers of John Huston in the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. There I began to reconstruct the development of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* as a film and to fathom its mysteries.

First among them is the identity of the novel's author, B. Traven. The author who signed his work with that name lived in Mexico and was represented by the agent Paul Kohner, who also represented John Huston. Letters from Traven to Kohner and to Huston are among Huston's papers.

When newspapers reported the death of a man who called himself Hal Croves in Mexico in 1969, many believed that he was Traven. Huston, who had come to know Croves well while directing *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* was never quite certain that Croves and Traven were one and the same. In his lifetime, Traven—who had won renown as the author of *The Bridge in the Jungle* and *The Death Ship,* as well as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*—was as elusive as Thomas Pynchon is today. A dispatch from Mexico in the *New York Times* of June 25, 1990, quoted Rosa Elena Luján de

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Traven, Traven's widow, as "finally revealing that Traven was previously known as Ret Marut, a sometime actor and the editor of *Der Ziegelbrenner,* a journal of anti-war and anarchist persuasions . . . published episodically in Germany between 1917 and 1920." This prompted a letter to the editor from Judy Stone, film critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and author of *The Mystery of B. Traven,* declaring that Traven's widow had "confirmed that identification" to her in 1966 and had stated, Stone claimed, that "her husband was the son of a very high German official, a Hohenzollern"—later affirming that she meant Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Among Huston's papers I found a letter from Traven to Paul Kohner, posted from Mexico on December 29, 1941, in which Traven asserts that there are only two lies about himself, concerning his nationality and his given name, that he has ever troubled to challenge: "I immediately came out correcting that false statement and declaring that I was American, born in the U.S. The other lie was that of being a Bruno. Scores of time I protested against that lie."

This letter followed by a month the ninety-day option agreement between Traven and Warners for rights to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* Warners' lawyers insisted that only Traven's full and valid name on the contract would satisfy them. But it remained B. Traven when Kohner, with Traven's power of attorney, signed a contract calling for three option payments of $500 each and a final payment of $5,000 (issued on September 4, 1942).

The Huston papers include a revealing exchange between Huston and J. H. McCallum, then the publisher of Harcourt, Brace and Company. Having noticed an article in the *New York Times* of March 7, 1946, reporting that Huston was to write and direct *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* McCallum writes extolling Traven's work and drawing the writer-director's attention to a close parallel between *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale," with "its lean and brutal strength." He adds his hope that Huston will preserve Traven's "cool objectivity and great strength." Huston replies punctiliously, thanking McCallum, admitting that he has not read Chaucer's tale but stating that he will do so immediately, and expressing his own admiration for Traven's work. He tells McCallum, "I got Warners to purchase *The Treasure* shortly before the war, and all the time I was in the Army I was afraid that they might let someone else do it. Naturally, I couldn't imagine anyone else doing anything but ruin it. I am alone in this opinion, however, and there was every chance of its being done before I could get out of the Army."

In his engaging memoir, *An Open Book,* published by Knopf in 1980, Huston salutes producer Henry Blanke as his "champion and mentor" at Warners, where Huston had written *Juarez* for Blanke and had directed his first film, *The Maltese Falcon,* from his own adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's novel, with Blanke producing. Huston writes, "*Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was to be my next picture for Warner Brothers, when war was

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declared. Henry Blanke got them to hold it for me during the time I was in the Army."

As my search of the Warners' archives at USC would reveal, this was not quite so. Indexed on eleven pages of the immense archival catalogue (more than forty volumes, upwards of fifteen thousand pages) are the names of other writers who worked on *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* evidently for Henry Blanke, before Huston got his chance. One was Robert Rossen.

Rossen was neither the first nor the last. In the heyday of the studio system, it was not unusual for platoons of writers to toil on a screenplay. A writer or a team of writers would be dismissed when they were deemed "written out," and new ones signed on. Ink-stained prestidigitators as gifted as Ben Hecht and Herman Mankiewicz wrote scenes and sequences for films on which they received (and perhaps wished) no credit. The practice still occurs. When *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was finally filmed, in 1947, the brothers Warner, Henry Blanke, and Huston could have drawn on the work of Arthur Arent, Norbert Faulkner, Robert Rossen, Walter Gorman, and David Commons. Among the Warner Brothers contracts preserved in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, I found a quitclaim signed by Commons, dated August 28, 1942, attesting that he had been fully compensated "for the writing of said treatment [of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*] . . . under [my] said arrangement with the said B. Traven and/or Paul Kohner." I haven't found Commons's treatment, perhaps the first to be commissioned. I have, however, examined the work of the other adapters of Traven's novel who labored for Warner Brothers.

Before we can judge what these writers may have contributed to the final screen adaptation of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* we need to compare their work with its source.

Traven's novel tells the story of three Americans down on their luck in Mexico of the 1920s, when the oil boom fizzles. Dobbs is desperate for any kind of work; unable to find it, he is reduced to stooping for cigarette butts, cadging centavos from well-to-do passersby, and sleeping in the grimmest of flophouses. Taken on by an oil camp contractor who needs an extra hand, Dobbs meets Curtin, another hard-luck Yankee, on a brutal work site deep in the bush. Laid off and on the beach again, the two have to threaten the tough contractor for wages he is holding back. Their dreams of striking it rich are fed by the yarns of an old prospector, Howard, in Dobbs's flophouse, despite the veteran's warning that the lust for gold can turn good men bad. When Dobbs's lottery ticket unexpectedly pays off 100 pesos, Howard puts up most of his nest egg, Curtin wires a friend for $100, and the three head for the Sierra Madre to search for gold.

On a grueling trek, as Dobbs and Curtin are ready to quit, the practiced eye of the indefatigable Howard spots traces of gold, and they set in to mine it. After months of backbreaking work, alternately saving each other's lives

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and cursing each other, each has secreted his share of a respectable pile of gold. One night an intruder appears at their campfire. Named Lacaud, he is an earnest, decent fellow from Arizona who seems to know a good deal about gold and is sure that the mountain where they are digging holds a rich lode. Alarmed because they have never registered a claim, the three compadres insist they are hunters out for hides. But Lacaud isn't fooled. In their tent that night, the three partners discuss what to do about him and the threat he poses. Dobbs argues for killing him; Howard is opposed; Curtin is undecided.

In the morning, a decision becomes moot when about fifteen horsemen are sighted ascending the mountain: bandits. Among them is a man wearing a straw sombrero painted gold. He resembles the leader of a band that robbed a train and massacred the passengers, as Lacaud explains to the others. The four acquit themselves well when Gold Hat and his men attack. But they survive only because the desperadoes, after a night and a day, suddenly abandon the siege to make their escape, having sighted pursuing cavalry in the valley below. Thankful to be alive, Dobbs, Curtin, and Howard elect to take what gold they have and leave the mountain to Lacaud. Hiding the sacks of gold among bundles of hides packed on their burros, they start for Durango. On the way, Howard heeds the entreaty of Indians and saves the life of a child who seems to have drowned. The Indians will not let him leave until he has been ceremonially thanked. Howard entrusts his gold to Dobbs and Curtin, who promise to bank it for him.

As the two move on, Dobbs proposes that they abscond with the old man's gold; Curtin refuses. Dobbs accuses Curtin of planning to kill him and take all the treasure for himself. On the trail, in a series of turnabouts, Dobbs eventually outlasts Curtin, shoots him twice with his own pistol, tosses the gun down beside the body, and leaves Curtin for dead. Days later, thirsty, exhausted, and deranged, Dobbs sights Durango from a hill and stops by some trees to rest. Three mestizos who had been lying there menace the lone gringo. Desperate, Dobbs draws his pistol and pulls the trigger repeatedly—without getting off a shot, for Curtin had unloaded the weapon when he had the upper hand. Dobbs is then beheaded with his own machete.

Rifling the packs on the burros, the thieves discover sacks hidden among bundles of hides and angrily pour out what they take to be sand, thinking it's part of a gringo trick to make the hides weigh more. After fighting over Dobbs's wretched clothes, the thieves put them on and go to an Indian village to sell the burros and hides. There the brands on the animals are recognized as those on burros bought by the three Americans. The alcalde of the village also recognizes Dobbs's hat and boots. The thieves are handed over to the mounted police, to be exhibited through the neighborhood and summarily shot.

Meanwhile, Howard has become famous as a medicine man. The gravely wounded Curtin is found by charcoal burners, and the Indians summon

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Howard to treat him. Soon after, when the alcalde delivers the burros and packs to Howard, the old prospector finds that all the gold is gone, save for one small sack that had been overlooked. Howard's burst of laughter is Homeric. He sees the cosmic joke—ten months of drudgery, savagery, and murder. And for what? At first Curtin can't see what's so funny, but eventually the irony sinks in and he laughs as loudly. The two surviving partners discuss what do to with their little grubstake. Perhaps open a delicatessen in Tampico? Too risky; Howard recommends the life of a medicine man. It's an honorable profession, and medicine men live well.

Traven's novel is a fable, a classic *conte moral,* that shows how lust for wealth destroys a man. It is replete with Marxist excoriations of American big business, the capitalist barons of Wall Street, and the oppressive role of the Catholic Church in Mexico. The principal character, Fred C. Dobbs—who would be played in the film by its major star, Humphrey Bogart—is revealed to be a morally corrupt man who betrays his comrades, resorts to murder, and dies ignobly in the end. There was much about the novel to send a shudder through Jack Warner, the studio's czar, though it is unlikely that he ever read it himself.

In the Theater Collection of the University of California at Los Angeles is a memo dated August 28, 1934—before the U.S. publication of the book—from a Mr. Daugherty to a Mr. MacEwan of Warners. Daugherty writes that he has seen a lot of material like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* and "I think we should leave this one alone." In the USC archives is a synopsis of Traven's novel and a recommendation, dated July 8, 1940, from a Mr. Thompson to Charles L. Tedford of Warners. "Another thought that came to mind was the possibility of our doing a comedy melodrama with a South American locale," writes Thompson. "It will require some radical changes." (Savants of like wisdom still ordain what will be made, and how, in Hollywood.)

In the trove of original drafts, copies, duplicates of outlines, partial screenplays and complete ones that archivist Adams located for me at USC, the earliest is a carbon copy of 65 pages, a partial script. While neither an author's name nor a date appears on the standard blue paper cover of the Warner Brothers Studio, on the last page is a typed note: "Dear Henry, This first draft has been overwritten on purpose. This is particularly true of the stories told by Howard. They will be taken care of—cut-down, pointed-up in the final draft. We just want you to know that we know about it." It is signed "A & F" and dated "January 6/42."

Henry is Henry Blanke. A & F are Arthur Arent and Norbert Faulkner. (I can find neither credited as screenwriter for any film produced.) Arent and Faulkner went on to write a complete screenplay of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* I read the original 190-page typescript, undated, which has a penciled *#1* on the cover and is presumably the copy that went to producer Blanke. Two other versions are in the Warners archives, one of 150 pages,

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another of 206 pages, each annotated throughout with additions, revisions, and deletions. The catalogue dates these two, respectively, circa 1945 and July 14, 1945. Since Arent and Faulkner began their work in January 1942, these dates are highly improbable—unless Blanke recalled the writers, or exhumed their work. Neither seems likely.

In a general way, Arent and Faulkner are faithful to the spirit and shape of Traven's novel. In their first draft, they begin with Dobbs panhandling in the street of Tampico from a prosperous-looking American—Traven's Man in a White Suit—whom Dobbs mindlessly pesters three times, until he is told off. They have Dobbs and Curtin meet in a cheap bar, share the flophouse where Howard lives, and hear his long story of the lost Agua Verde mine. The 65-page draft ends with Dobbs winning the national lottery to obtain the stake that makes possible the search for gold.

Arent and Faulkner subsequently scripted an account of Dobbs, Curtin, and Howard on the train journey toward the Sierra Madre. The train is attacked by bandits, and many of the passengers are killed, as Traven has Lacaud explain to the three partners. The screenwriters named the gold-sombreroed bandit chieftain Diego, and called his sidekick Tito. (In later drafts, they reintroduce them in an important way.) On the cover of this section of script is a notation, perhaps by Blanke, indicating that the massacre sequence has been eliminated, doubtless by the producer.

In their complete screenplay, Arent and Faulkner effect some significant changes from Traven's original. They make Curtin older than Dobbs. (In Huston's film, Dobbs is senior; in Traven's book, age is indeterminate, but Curtin is tougher and less idealistic than the Curtin of the film, and he utters some of Dobbs's harsher lines.) Their screenplay opens with Dobbs and Curtin rigging the oil camp for McCormick, the crooked contractor. Unlike the novel, in which the pair merely threaten McCormick for the pay he's holding back, Arent and Faulkner's version has them fight McCormick and take what he owes them. They are then conned out of their earnings in a gambling hell, where Curtin is slipped a mickey. Arent and Faulkner draw a Howard who, unemployed and fearful, follows Dobbs and Curtin into the country. In a dingy hotel, they are robbed by bandits (Diego, Tito, and their band). However, Dobbs's win in the lottery makes possible their prospecting for gold.

The rest of the writers' construction largely follows Traven's, with the notable exception that Lacaud, the interloper who so alarms the trio, is killed in the act of saving Curtin during the bandits' attack—thus resolving the problem Lacaud presents for the three partners. Dobbs's attempted murder of Curtin is preserved, as is his death at the hands of mestizos—who are not just any thieves but the frightening Diego, Tito, and another scoundrel. Arent and Faulkner bring their story to an end with a flourish of moral underlining designed to gladden Jack Warner's heart. Though their fortune has been poured away by the ignorant bandits, Howard (by

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then revered as a medicine man) and Curtin accept their fate philosophically. Howard hands Curtin a gold nugget that has been given him by his Indian hosts and tells him to drop it into the village well. As he looks downward, we see words similar to the epigraph of Traven's novel—which opened the film in an identical shot—shimmering on the surface: "The glittering treasure that you seek is not worth the journey. The real treasure, which life is too short to find, lies on the other side." Curtin drops the nugget, and the words ripple away.

For reasons I shall probably never learn—though I find their screenplay wordy, lacking in tension, and, at least at the outset, short on realism—Arent and Faulkner were taken off the project, and Robert Rossen became the next adapter of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* An established writer who would make his name as a producer and director, Rossen was known for his liberal sociopolitical views, and he doubtless found Traven's leftist attitudes sympathetic. In the Warners archive is an eighteen-page partial script by Rossen, undated, and a much fuller version—132 pages, though incomplete, dated February 26, 1943. Another copy, with the same date and still unfinished, runs to 145 pages.

In Rossen's construction, Howard's lengthy yarn about the lost Agua Verde mine assumes critical importance. Dobbs and Curtin believe Howard knows the location of the rich lode that had cost the lives of so many. The developing relationship of the three gold seekers follows Traven to a degree. But Rossen has Howard leave the other two, finally fed up with his bickering, distrustful partners and content with the share of gold he already has. Soon after, Lacaud appears, and Howard, relenting, returns. Lacaud too is persuaded that Howard could lead them all to the great Agua Verde mine. Setting out to dig one day, they unearth the ancient skeleton of a Spaniard; Lacaud sees it as a sign of the mine's location. With a viciousness that neither Traven nor the *Treasure*'s other screenwriters ever attributed to Howard, the old prospector hurls a rock at Lacaud, wounding him seriously. Rossen then has the covetous Dobbs and Curtin turn on Howard. They tie him to a tree and deprive him of water in an attempt to extract the location of the lost mine. Curtin tells Howard that he can expect much worse from Dobbs unless he reveals it. So ends Rossen's draft.

On the basis of these incomplete scripts, there is no accounting for the appearance of Rossen's name on the complete screenplay dated January 1, 1947, which corresponds closely to the film that Huston would direct.

Blanke now signed on another writer to mine *The Treasure.* Walter Gorman (for whom I cannot find a screenplay credit on a completed film) produced a partial treatment, dated May 26, 1945, of sixteen pages. It is a romantic work, opening with titles over billowing clouds, that sets out to dramatize Howard's tale—related in Traven's novel—of Donna Catalina Maria de Rodriguez, a beautiful and valiant widow in eighteenth-century

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Mexico, who takes over her murdered husband's mine, determined to return to Spain as the richest woman in the realm. Fearing "neither death nor the devil," as Traven puts it, she prevails through years of appalling vicissitudes to amass immense riches of gold and silver, only to be betrayed, and to have her treasure sequestered, by the powerful viceroy of Mexico. Blanke apparently rejected this conception, or perhaps higher authorities did; but Gorman soldiered on. On June 2, 1945, he turned in a newly conceived treatment of twenty-two pages that brings Dobbs, Curtin, and Howard together, not in Mexico but in Los Angeles, just after World War II. Two weeks later, Gorman had fleshed out this treatment. There is no episode of Dobbs and Curtin attacking McCormick. Lacaud is written out of the story, though the attack by Gold Hat and his band is preserved. So, too, is Howard's succor of the Indian boy and the Indians' elevation of him as a medicine man. Dobbs treacherously shoots Curtin, but is killed in turn by the mestizos, who dump out the sacks of gold. The wounded Curtin is brought to Howard's care but ungratefully turns against him, and they part.

By July 2, 1945, Gorman had completed a full screenplay. Curtin is a newly discharged army corporal who meets Dobbs, a former sergeant in World War I, on a bench in L.A.'s Mexican Plaza. In a dive, they rescue Howard, who has suffered a beating. They commandeer a cab and take him to an address they find on papers in his pocket, along with documents indicating that, years before, Howard had brought some nine thousand dollars in gold from Mexico.

Gorman began a revised screenplay in August, probably after receiving Blanke's comments on his draft. He now takes longer to get his principals together and the story under way. He opens with ex-G.I. Curtin getting off a train in L.A. and meeting Dobbs, once a sergeant in his own outfit. In a bar they see Howard, a shabby figure of ridicule, tripped and badly injured by a lout. Curtin and Dobbs carry the unconscious old man to the sleazy hotel where the barman says he lives. As Howard lies abed, still unconscious, they search his pockets, hoping to find the name of some relative whom they can notify of his condition. Instead they find a treasure map. Waking, and furious at this invasion of his privacy, the old prospector orders them out. Curtin and Dobbs separate. Later that night, Dobbs awakes in his flophouse and makes his way back to the hotel, where the light in Howard's room is still lit. Here the screenplay stops. There is no evidence that Gorman progressed with the work.

Almost a year later, in July 1946, John Huston returned to Warner Brothers as the writer and director of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* Behind him were three documentary films. Two, *The Battle of San Pietro* and the still-suppressed *Let There Be Light,* about the army's treatment of battle-induced neuroses, are works of blistering realism. Huston was ready to return to the Mexico he had known as a young man and to put Traven's

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hard-bitten characters on screen. What surely appealed to Huston about *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is its gritty Mexican setting and spare, sinewy narrative about a trio of life's castoffs who struggle against the odds on a grand quest, in which they fail and receive their just deserts. It is a theme he explored in such memorable films as *The Maltese Falcon, The Asphalt Jungle,* and *The Man Who Would Be King*—like *The Treasure,* all richly ironic works. Huston produced the first sixteen pages of his screenplay by July 9; by July 30, he was up to thirty pages, and by August 30 he had drafted a complete screenplay of 152 pages. It is remarkably close to his final shooting script and the finished film.

Blanke could have suggested that Huston read drafts of the previous writers' work on *The Treasure,* but as he had allegedly promised Huston to "hold it" for him during Huston's army service, perhaps he did not. I am persuaded that Huston turned directly to the novel and produced the most effective adaptation of Traven's story, both in spirit and in substance, of any of the writers who had worked for Blanke. Huston, too, made certain departures from Traven's treatment of character and event. In doing so, he enjoyed Traven's support.

Writing to agent Paul Kohner about *The Treasure* in August 1940, the novelist had shown a considerable interest in a film adaptation. His letter suggests that he might be the screenwriter and even an actor, since "anyone can act, even Pauline [*sic*] Goddard." He offers, as well, to serve as the film's art director. Six years later, after reading Huston's draft screenplay, Traven writes to Kohner, "By the first rapid look, I realized that an expert had handled it." Then, on September 2, 1946, in a letter to Huston, he says, "Your script is so good, almost too good, that it could remain as it is without change. However, a few changes will, and of this I am positive, make the picture better still." He goes on to call Huston's screenplay "brilliantly analyzed and expressed." Traven adds that he would like to propose small changes, dealing almost entirely with technical matters—social references, matters of coinage, phrases in Spanish, and so forth.

In the Huston holdings of the Academy library, I found another document, evidently from Traven, in which he makes a number of practical recommendations, such as ignoring the specific 1920 period of the novel and its references to certain social and political particulars that might seem anachronistic or parochial. He suggests cutting the "side stories," Howard's tales of the Agua Verde mine and the misadventures of Donna Catalina Maria de Rodriguez, instead adroitly proposing that "we pick them up later, and make two entirely new pictures." He also recommends treating certain material in flashbacks.

Huston replied generously to this forthcoming and admiring reaction from a famous author known to be prickly, obstinate, and reclusive. He agreed to all of Traven's points except the flashbacks, which the writer-director viewed as awkward and unnecessary. Traven, in turn, responded in

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the same spirit, acceding to all of Huston's changes, including the alteration of the intruder's name from Lacaud to Cody.

The character of the intruder and his name were important to Huston. He recognized, as had Arent, Faulkner, and Rossen, that after Lacaud/Cody was introduced as a threat to the three partners' golden secret, it would be dramatically weak to leave him to pursue his dreams, as Traven had done. Huston's single most effective stroke is to make the arrival of Lacaud/Cody and its consequences the dramatic and moral linchpin of his screen story.

In Huston's first-draft script, on the morning after his appearance at the partners' camp, Cody tells them, "Whatever you say or don't say tomorrow, I start to dig for gold here." After this line of dialogue (somewhat like one of Traven's), Huston writes an explanatory passage unlike any other in the screenplay, vividly conveying his conception of this scene as the fulcrum on which the dramatic development will turn:

> Unseen and unheard, another presence joins the now silent group—murder is amongst them. Solid and real as if made of flesh and bone. All their thoughts were upon this new companion in their midst. The problem of what to do about Cody is insignificant compared to the decision each of the partners must make—to kill or not to kill.

The lines are literary, and they carry metaphysical freight. They are not to be found in Traven. As the scene unfolds, Cody coolly lays out the options for the three partners: run him off, kill him, or take him on as a partner. The three repair to their tent to consider the situation. Dobbs—whom Huston has taken pains to reveal as short-fused and deteriorating—presses for killing Cody, allowing Bogart to deliver one of his memorable lines: "Fred C. Dobbs ain't a guy who likes being taken advantage of." The pragmatic, forbearing Howard is against killing, and the rough but decent Curtin is uncommitted. Suddenly Cody's shout summons them to a vantage point from which they see approaching riders—the fearsome bandits. Then, in the screenplay, Dobbs pulls his gun and threatens Cody, sure that he has betrayed them. Cody, however, convinces them that they will need him to help fight the bandits.

In shooting the film, the director departed significantly from his script. He has Dobbs, Curtin, and Howard—the last with clear reluctance—take out their weapons, advance on Cody, and cock their guns, intending to fire. Cody knows he is about to be killed, but just then he sees the approaching horsemen below. Huston's direction of the scene declares that each of the three gold seekers has committed murder in his heart. He underscores Traven's fable by showing how each man is corrupted by his longing for wealth.

In the process of adapting the novel to a screenplay, Huston made a series of dramatically effective decisions. First, he made each of the three

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partners different. Howard, though as wise, resourceful, and loquacious as Traven's figure, is more consistently genial and engaging. Dobbs is the chancer of Traven's book but is deprived of some easier-going moments, and the flaws in his character are earlier and progressively delineated. Curtin is made younger, and some of the rougher edges of the character are softened, partly by giving some of Curtin's meaner lines and sentiments to Dobbs. Huston begins, as does Traven, with Dobbs as an unemployed foreigner reduced to begging in the streets of Tampico. He eliminates Traven's account of Dobbs's fruitless search, with an American named Barber, for work in the oil fields. Dobbs first meets Curtin on a park bench in Tampico, each jobless and desperate, and they meet again on the work gang that McCormick recruits to rig an oil camp.

In an important sequence, Huston (like Arent and Faulkner) shows Dobbs and Curtin becoming allies when they fight McCormick for the wages he owes them. In a shift of his own devising, he signs them into the tawdry Osso Negro hotel, where they hear old Howard gab about gold prospecting. When Dobbs's lottery ticket pays off, Howard throws in his savings, providing the wherewithal to buy equipment, supplies, and pack animals. Curtin does not wire for money, as Traven has him do; instead Dobbs grandly offers to stake him, setting up a cause for later dissension.

After setting the scene succinctly and vividly, and bringing the partners together, Huston infuses the film with energy—effectively launching its "second act"—by dramatizing the three adventurers' rail journey toward the Sierra Madre. Instead of hearing of the bandits' attack on the train from Lacaud/Cody, the three are *on* that train, fighting together for their lives. Here Huston reveals a Dobbs euphoric about shooting and killing, boasting that he'd narrowly missed Gold Hat, who will prove his nemesis.

Not only does Gold Hat lead the attack on the miners' camp, but unlike Traven, Huston also has him and his sidekicks return as the ruffians whom Dobbs encounters after betraying his partners and shooting Curtin. In the film's most unforgettable image, Dobbs throws himself down to drink at a waterhole and sees the terrifying face of Gold Hat reflected in the water. Gold Hat then slays him.

Huston's script has the three Americans buy burros in a village where the brands will be identified when Dobbs's killers try to sell the animals there. Later, after the murderers' execution, Howard and Curtin learn from a village boy where the bandits said they poured out the sacks of sand found in the gringos' packs. In shooting the end of the film, Huston extended his study in irony by having Howard and Curtin gallop to a ruined monastery, where they see a few empty sacks clinging to cactus. The wind is howling. All the gold has blown away, vanished like the dreams of the three who sought the treasure of the Sierra Madre, returned to the earth from which it had been wrested with so much pain.

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Splendid as it is, Huston's film is not without blemish. In a lull during the bandit attack on the partners' camp, Huston has them discover Cody dead. He has been killed offscreen, a convenient solution to the moral dilemma of what to do about him. It is a deus-ex-machina device that seems especially contrived, because it is followed directly by the arrival of the cavalry, just in time to lift the bandits' siege. Cody's death permits Curtin to read a letter from Cody's young wife—a lachrymose text about the children missing daddy and the fruit trees in bloom, ending, "We've already found life's real treasure. Forever yours, Helen."

This recalls the epigraph of Traven's novel, and it is echoed in Howard's final proposal to Curtin: that his young partner take his share of what the hides and burros will bring and buy a ticket to Dallas, so that he can call on Cody's widow and tell her of her husband's fate. Curtin himself had talked of his hopes of becoming a fruit farmer. Thus this tale of greed, treachery, and shattered dreams ends with a ray of light. That may have been a sop to Jack Warner; Max Steiner's heavy-handed score underlines the obvious.

The letter and its implications are among Huston's few concessions to the Hollywood canon of the day. There was never great enthusiasm at Warners for making the film; by Hollywood's lights, it was a downbeat story about the downtrodden. But *The Treasure* would again team Bogart with Huston, whose first film as writer-director had been *The Maltese Falcon*. *Casablanca* had since made Bogart a major star. Movie moguls were doubtless concerned that he might tarnish his image as an existential hero by portraying a fatally flawed man who betrays his comrades, cracks up, and turns to murder. Short-term, they may have been right. The late Pauline Kael, who applauded *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* also noted that "it was a box-office failure in 1948, apparently because audiences resented Bogart's departure from the immensely popular *Casablanca* stereotype."

Inevitably, Huston's "final shooting script" of January 10, 1947, underwent minor revisions and cuts during production. Traven's Marxist views of American exploitation of Mexico were winnowed out. Among Huston's papers, I found a file labeled "Conference Notes"; on a yellow flimsy for page 90 of the draft screenplay is the notation: "Clean up Howard's long speech explaining the injustice shown Mexico by the United States." You won't find in the film Traven's observation that "Sing Sing, for those who don't know it, is the residence of all New Yorkers who get caught. The rest have offices in Wall Street." Still, some of Huston's lines preserved Traven's essential spirit. When Dobbs contends that he would be within his rights to demand half of Curtin's share of the gold, because he had put up the lion's share of the cash from his lottery winnings, Huston's script has Howard respond: "I think you're wise not to put things strictly on a money basis, partner. Curtin might take it into his head that he was a capitalist instead of a guy with a shovel and just sit back and take things easy and let you and me do all the work." In the film, the capitalist crack is cut.

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Censorship was still a powerful force in Hollywood. In the Academy library is a memo from censor Joseph L. Breen to J. L. Warner, dated August 23, 1946, with admonitions against giving offense to Mexicans, and about dropping such offensive language as "Geez," "Lord," and "helluva." Citing a scene in Tampico, in which Dobbs looks after a girl "who gives him the once-over" and goes into a house with a "Furnished Rooms" sign in Spanish, Breen inveighs against any hint of a disorderly house.

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre was one of the first largely location pictures made outside Hollywood, though a number of sets were built at the Warners studio. Huston; his art director, John Hughes; and Mexican production manager Luis Sanchez Tello made an eight-thousand-mile location survey. As with all pictures made away from the controlled conditions of a studio, there were difficulties. After the first week's shooting in Tampico, where all went swimmingly, the Mexican government abruptly shut down the production because of a local newspaper's claim that the film was discreditable to Mexico. Apparently the editor had not received the expected bribe. Warner Brothers filed complaints through the State Department, but Huston's artist friends Miguel Covarrubias and Diego Rivera also called on the president of Mexico to plead the director's cause. The president's representative investigated, and permission to resume filming was granted. A few weeks later the obstreperous editor was shot dead. According to Huston, "he was caught in the wrong bed by a jealous husband."

Huston surely relished much of the rough-and-tumble on location. In his papers is a description of his negotiations with a man providing horses and riders for the production:

> "How much?" [asks Huston].
> "Oh, twenty pesos a day."
> "Good riders?"
> "What Mexican isn't?"
> "How much for tricks?"
> "No extra charge."
> "I said, 'My company would be willing to pay up to forty pesos for trick riders.'"
> "He said, 'For that amount they will let you shoot them in the arms and legs. Not to kill, you understand?' He waved a warning finger at me. 'No killing. We can't have any of that.'"

Before going to Mexico, Huston had sought a meeting with Traven. There had been a cordial exchange of letters, with Traven suggesting that Huston himself play the Man in the White Suit, which in fact he did. They fixed a rendezvous at Mexico City's Hotel Bamer, but Traven did not appear. About a week later, Huston awoke one morning to find a slight, unprepossessing man in odd countryman's clothes at the foot of his bed. He proffered a card: *Hal Croves—Translator. Aculpulco and San Antonio.* He

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also produced a letter from Traven explaining that he was ill and unable to come, but that "Croves" was his friend, completely familiar with his work and the country, and authorized to represent him. Huston engaged Croves as a consultant, and thereafter he was much in Huston's company and omnipresent on the set. When the movie was released, *Life* published an article with a photograph of Croves, taken on location, beside a 1922 photograph supposedly of Traven. *Life*'s correspondent had asked Bogart if he could identify the man in the 1922 picture. "Sure, pal," replied Bogart, "I'd know him anywhere. I worked with him for ten weeks in Mexico." Huston, who died in 1987, remained undecided about the identity of his consultant. But Croves/Traven's influence may have amplified Huston's own knowledge of Mexico, for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is distinguished by the look and feel of the Mexican outback, and the Spanish spoken by the native actors heightens the realism of the film.

Today, Huston's film seems superbly cast. But Blanke and the studio weighed many alternative choices. Ronald Reagan was considered for the part of Cody until a screen test clinched it for Bruce Bennett. Walter Brennan was the leading candidate for Howard's role—Walter Huston's name was twentieth on one list I saw—until son John Huston chose his father for the part he made unforgettable. Alfonso Bedoya, who seems recruited from hell to play Gold Hat, was a part-time actor discovered in Mexico. Huston writes that one of Gold Hat's confederates "had actually been a bandit."

In Mexico, Huston worked with the sureness and efficiency for which he was known, while Blanke "ran interference at the studio." But there were hectoring telegrams and memos from Jack Warner about schedule and budget. (The film cost $2.474 million exclusive of prints and advertising, a considerable sum at the time.) Huston and Bogart had their only falling-out over the star's eagerness to finish in time to race his yacht, *Santana,* in the Catalina-to-Honolulu regatta. Bogart put pressure on the studio, which badgered Huston. Determined that his film come first, Huston wrenched Bogart's nose at dinner one night. But they quickly made peace.

Ezra Goodman, sometime Warners publicist and Hollywood chronicler, recalled, "In one sequence that kept shooting for four days, Bogart was looking for water. Warner looked at the rushes at the studio and said, 'If that son of a gun doesn't find water soon, I'll go broke.'"

Still, when the film was in the can, the studio chieftain recognized what Huston and his cast and crew had wrought. After viewing 12,500 feet (about two hours and eighteen minutes) of film on August 1, 1947, Jack Warner wired Ben Kalmanson, a Warners executive in New York: "This is definitely the greatest motion picture we have ever made."

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre has stood the test of time. I, for one, hope that no writer, producer, director, or star ever decides to remake it.

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The Alien

GREG DELANTY

I'm back again scrutinizing the Milky Way
of your ultrasound, scanning the dark
matter, the nothingness, that now the heads say
is chockablock with quarks & squarks,
gravitons & gravitini, photons & photinos. Our sprout,

who art there inside the spacecraft
of your ma, the time capsule of this printout,
hurling & whirling towards us, it's all daft
on this earth. Our alien who art in the heavens,
our Martian, our little green man, we're anxious

to make contact, to ask divers questions
about the heavendom you hail from, to discuss
the whole shebang of the beginning&end,
the pre-big bang untime before you forget the why
and lie of thy first place. And, our friend,

to say Welcome, that we mean no harm, we'd die
for you even, that we pray you're not here
to subdue us, that we'd put away
our ray guns, missiles, attitude and share
our world with you, little big head, if only you stay.

Greg Delanty teaches at St. Michael's College in Burlington, Vermont. His most recent collection of poetry, *The Blind Stitch*, will be published this fall by Louisiana State University Press.

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The Art of the Obituary

MARK KRUPNICK

Some newspaper readers start their days with the sports section or the crossword puzzle. I start with the death notices. My favorite American paper is the *New York Times,* partly because it's the best at obituaries. I doubt I am alone in my fascination with obits, but people don't talk about the recently deceased as they do about the Yankees or the Lakers. Cultural studies professors write articles about comic strips and hip-hop, but nobody writes about the obituary as either a literary form or an expression of social mores.

My own interest in obituaries is easy enough to understand. I have a terminal illness, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. ALS, more familiarly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a neurodegenerative muscular disease that usually claims its victims' lives within two to four years of diagnosis. My own illness was discovered about a year and a half ago, so you might be reading my own obit before too long.

Being terminally ill, however, hasn't made me obsess about my own obituary; it has merely intensified my longstanding interest in other people's obits. As a scholar specializing in literary history, I have always read obituaries as minibiographies—stories of lives, not of deaths. At their best, obituaries strip away the nonessentials in order to disclose the inner form of their subjects' personal dramas. Few things fascinate me more than the trajectories of human lives.

I was therefore as pleased as can be when, several years ago, I was introduced to the obit editors at the London *Guardian* by an American friend who wrote occasional obits for them, and was asked to try my hand. Before I became sick with ALS, I wrote about a dozen obits of American writers for the *Guardian.* Most of these have not yet been published because their sub-

Mark Krupnick, Professor of Literature and Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, is the author of *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism.* He is completing a collection of essays on Jewish writers and intellectuals.

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jects are still alive. They were written, in newspaper lingo, as "advance obits." I was paid, as it were, for inventory that went into storage, from which it would be extracted when one of my notables died.

Several of my subjects are in their eighties and nineties, whereas I just turned sixty-three. I get up every morning to see if one of them has died—in the hope, frustrated each time, that I will finally see my name in print and receive acknowledgment for my work. When I see that they have all survived another day, I think to myself, Dammit! Every day my muscles weaken further; I have to take food through a tube inserted in my stomach; I can no longer speak; diminishing strength in my hands is beginning to threaten my ability to dress myself. Meanwhile, the subjects of my as-yet-unpublished obits are still touting their books and accepting prizes and receiving honorary degrees. Who would have thought, when I wrote about these buggers, that they would outlive me? Am I angry about my fate? Dear reader, would *you* be? But maybe I'll get lucky and one or two will die before me.

My obits for the *Guardian*, like most British newspaper obits, are not straight, chronological accounts; in order to provide some sense of the subject's personality, they include a good deal of interpretation and evaluation. Though in writing them I never violated the taboo against speaking ill of the dead, neither did I pretend to the perfect objectivity of the *New York Times*. But I didn't go nearly as far as some of my British colleagues at the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, who have led the shift from the formal standard once set by the stiffly solemn obits in the *Times* of London. My obits—and those of my American friend—place us, as authors, firmly in the background, whereas many Brit-on-Brit obits are now "appreciations" informed by the writer's friendship with the deceased. They often refer to the dead person by his or her first name. The impression they create is that of an intimate society in which everyone who matters knows everyone else. You get a feeling for what Gertrude Stein once called England's "daily island life," with its predictable rituals and secure social hierarchy.

In his excellent "Essay upon Epitaphs," William Wordsworth argued that the epitaph form reflected a desire to render eternal the memory of the deceased. The original impulse for inscriptions upon tombs, he said, arose from a belief in immortality. It might seem that the modern obituary had its origins in such sentiments, which were formalized in the poetic epitaph, a literary genre that had its heyday in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, obituaries as a form did not begin until later and were a far more modest way of acknowledging the dead. At the start, in the late eighteenth century, a periodical's obituary column was a mere list of recently deceased worthies. With the expansion of the popular press and the reading public, these notices gradually expanded to the length of our modern newspaper obits.

Even now, a substantial part of each day's obit section is devoted to brief death notices of the old-fashioned sort. My local paper distinguishes between

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the "paid death notice" and the "unpaid news obituary." In the former case, family or friends of the deceased compose the notice, which usually runs only a few lines. It may suggest something about our modern secular culture that you place this notice through the paper's classified advertising department, as if the deceased were a used car you were trying to sell. When it comes to the unpaid news obit, the relatives of the deceased are also often involved in "selling"—persuading the news staff that their dead son or mother deserves to be written up because of his or her contribution to the community. Of course, there are figures for whom no such pleading is necessary. If your father was Joe Bonanno or John Gotti, he will end up in the paper when he's dead because he was in the paper when he was alive.

American obituaries reflect a very different sense of time from the eye-on-eternity perspective of the traditional poetic epitaph. Like the modern newspaper itself, the obit section strives to be timely and topical. The obits in the *New York Times* are written as news stories. The understanding is that the recently dead are part of a passing show and that, like the front-page headlines themselves, they will be replaced tomorrow by new objects of interest.

At the other end of the spectrum is London's *Daily Telegraph*, which, by encouraging us to remember its obituary subjects as comic figures, may come closer to conferring Wordsworthian immortality than any other paper in the world.

But Wordsworth could never have anticipated the emergence of the humorous obituary. That innovation in the tradition of death writing can be credited to Hugh Massingberd, who became the *Telegraph*'s obituary editor in the mid-1980s. Massingberd had previously been the editor of Burke's peerage publications, a background that equipped him well for the right-leaning *Telegraph*, with its sympathetic attitudes toward England's hereditary aristocracy. As it turned out, Massingberd's obits page devoted a great deal of attention to recently deceased lords and baronets, but showed little of the piety toward them that one might have anticipated.

The Very Best of The Daily Telegraph Books of Obituaries, published in London last year, is Massingberd's sixth compilation of the paper's obits, all so well written that they are likely to make a small place for themselves in English literary history. A bestseller in the United Kingdom, *The Very Best* is remarkable for the same charm, wit, and explosive irreverence that distinguished earlier *Telegraph* compilations, whose subtitles—including *Heroes and Adventurers, Entertainers,* and *Rogues*—suggest a readership interested more in eccentric characters than in Nobel prizewinners. Thus, we find the Third Lord Moynihan, whose "chief occupations were bongo-drummer, confidence trickster, brothelkeeper, drug-smuggler and police informer" and who "provided, through his character and career, ample ammunition for critics of the hereditary principle."

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Not all the *Telegraph*'s obits are of peers; plenty of scoundrels and oddballs can be found in the lower regions of show business and journalism. The former newspaperman Graham Mason, for example, found his true calling as "the drunkest man in the Coach and Horses, the pub in Soho where, in the half-century after the Second World War, a tragicomedy was played out nightly by its regulars." The *Telegraph* doesn't cast Mason's life in tragic terms; on the contrary, his mishaps are presented as farce.

The *Telegraph*'s most recent anthology also includes an obit of the memoirist Barbara Skelton, who caught the editor's eye less because of her writing than because of the "petulant promiscuity" it revealed. Skelton was sexually involved with several renowned figures in mid-twentieth-century literary London, including the book critic Cyril Connolly and the publisher George Weidenfeld, both of whom she married, as well as the drama critic Kenneth Tynan. Skelton's "peculiarly incisive malignity," in the words of the novelist Anthony Powell, seems not to have discouraged King Farouk of Egypt, with whom she also had an affair, as she did later in life with a French journalist, Bernard Frank, whose favors she shared with the novelist Françoise Sagan.

The *Telegraph*'s obituary of Skelton amuses and entertains; it makes no attempt to garner our sympathy. To appreciate the difference between British and American obituaries, one need only look at the headline from the recent *New York Times* obituary of another troubled woman writer notable for her well-written memoirs: "Caroline Knapp, Writer, 42; Chronicled Struggles and Joys," and then, in smaller type, "A columnist whose memoirs portrayed alcoholism and sweet lessons from her dog." After a dip into the *Telegraph* compilations, one might suspect the *Times* editors of irony at Ms. Knapp's expense. In fact, they were playing it perfectly straight in linking her drinking problem and her canine solution. The obit quotes from a book of hers: "I'm 38 and I'm single, and I'm having my most intense and gratifying relationship with a dog. But we all learn about love in different ways, and this happens to be mine." Maybe if I get a dog and write about it, I will feel better about my illness. I will definitely be in a better position to make a claim on the interest of the editor of the *Times* obit section.

A week before the *Times* honored Caroline Knapp, it featured an obit of Lois Gould, at the center of whose writing life was the sudden death of her husband, a *Times* reporter. The dead man had left among his effects a diary written in code. Gould unlocked the code and thereby discovered that her late husband had been a serial adulterer who had chosen many of his lovers from among Gould's own friends. According to the *Times*, Gould's first novel, which was based on this painful experience, "offered a raw, darkly comic portrait of [the main character's] emotional life—her grief, rage, amphetamine popping and suicidal depression—along with frank depictions of her sexual life, which ran the gamut from quiet marital frustration to ardent masturbation." Gould built her subsequent reputation on telling

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all, chiefly in novels but also in a memoir of her difficult relationship with her mother.

Ever since Sylvia Plath, the royal road to fame for American women writers has been the "confessional" mode. Not all have taken that path, but writers of only moderate talent have received more recognition and enjoyed greater sales than their contemporaries when they told stories of emotional suffering and attempts at suicide. That leads me to think about how a truly loving husband married to a novelist-memoirist might best plan to insure his wife's financial well-being after his death. A career of infidelities, documented in a diary, might be just the thing, although few financial consultants are likely to recommend it. In today's market, louche conduct and emotional anguish (transmuted into your widow's best-selling prose) may be worth a lot more than a portfolio of stocks.

I find the *Telegraph* obits of Barbara Skelton and her ilk altogether more appealing than those of the *Times*'s women, partly because the *Telegraph*'s ladies caused quite as much pain to their men as they got from them. Take, for example, Laura Riding, a minor poet who was Robert Graves's lover. The *Telegraph* cheerfully calls her "man-eating" and notes that she led a life "of cleverness unsanctified by humility, of power unredeemed by benevolence, and above all of human presumption swallowed up in the vast indifference of eternity." I know how our sympathies are supposed to run, but are dragons like Skelton and Riding so much less common than victims like Knapp and Gould?

The *Telegraph* obits may turn off American readers because of their cool indifference to the emotional distress of the families of their subjects. I have no doubt that Skelton, Riding, and whole battalions of men in these anthologies did suffer greatly, but their obits don't portray them with the aim of awakening the reader's compassion. Rather, the short lives in the *Telegraph* take as their models the characters in the British comic tradition from Shakespeare to Henry Fielding to Charles Dickens to Oscar Wilde to P. G. Wodehouse. In such comedy, externality is the great thing. You wouldn't be disposed to laugh while reading the obits of Barbara Skelton and Graham Mason if the emphasis were on their subjective pain.

I have enough pain of my own to make me grateful for the British revolution in obituary rhetoric, which has succeeded in making the *Telegraph* compilations such entertaining bedtime reading. I would be unlikely to keep the *Times* obit page by my bedside; its abundance of respect and paucity of anecdotes would weigh me down. But it isn't solely a literary issue, this contrast between the American fascination with psychological interiority and the British tendency to conceive of identity from the outside. Clearly it has a cultural-historical dimension as well.

The present period of British comic irreverence began shortly after the end of the Second World War, when the nation's great empire collapsed, and

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with it the class structure that had supported it. England's jokers have been flourishing ever since. To be sure, there were postwar writers (including John Osborne and the other Angry Young Men of the fifties) who were irritable rather than funny. But by the sixties, the anti-establishment stage review *Beyond the Fringe* and the magazine *Private Eye* had set the new tone in satire.

The politics of postimperial humor are surprising. The serious-minded obits in the left-leaning *Guardian* are well done, but not nearly as enjoyable as those in the *Telegraph.* How is it that the latter paper, traditionally associated with the values of the old class order, has chosen to make a home for such impudent obituaries?

Many Englishmen feel nostalgic for the old ways, but they also feel free to make fun of figures who call to mind that past and to laugh about their nation's diminished role. Indeed, part of the appeal of British obits to American readers is their near-total irrelevance to our more pressurized world. With so many enemies wanting to bring us down, we are far too anxious about our role as global leader to be ironic.

America presents itself officially as a deeply pious nation, and that image is reflected in our newspapers' dull obituaries. But the underlying mood of the nation is probably more accurately expressed in the nihilistic-anarchical style of American satiric novels, typically a mix of grief, rage, and madness. The English—think of *Monty Python*—prefer goofiness. The *Telegraph* obits don't go in for denunciation; they merely poke fun at traditional British types—clergymen, peers, army officers—who, even in their roguishness and eccentricity, call to mind a lost world. That they don't measure up to the standard of British rectitude in the great age of empire doesn't keep us from feeling fond of them.

American satirists display greater acerbity—in some cases, even fury and hatred. And our cultural commentary is far more extreme than the Brits'—no wonder, given the nearly daily exposure of outrageous misbehavior at the top of our major institutions. Still, it might induce more useful national self-reflection if we had a few more laughs.

What we need is something other than the solemnity with which our newspapers speak of the dead and the hysteria-infused vindictiveness with which our novelists target the living. We could do worse than to learn a spirit of forgiveness and fun from the Brits. The period near the end of life is a good time to divert ourselves. And the end itself is the best time for others to write about our lives with humor. I would welcome any American writer's attempt to apply the arts of amusement in an obit about me.

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Polonius, Our Pundit

CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

I once worked with a man who reveled in his authority but was too shrewd to revel in it gloriously, exuberantly, or crassly. Although his power base was a local institution, he had been a part of some of the large events of his time. He had served on national commissions. He had names on his Rolodex that he could and did drop. He believed in good manners, but at more informal gatherings, he would wear a bright, loosely tied scarf and chat up younger women with a glee that pushed at the envelope of his moderation. He thought of himself as a good man, and often spoke of his contributions to high-minded causes. Just as adamantly, he thought of himself as a wise man and diplomatic counselor, and was proud of his ability to come to the heart of the matter with the precision of a cardiologist. Slipping into retirement, he was even more absorbed by the delicacies of hierarchical arrangements and prickly about his position. He fussed at length about who should or should not be included in meetings. Once, when he thought he had been wrongly excluded from the routing of a draft report, he wrote, in anger, without irony, "There's a lot of quack left in this lame duck." Neither of us was spontaneously fond of the other. If I were to interpret his public comments about me disagreeably, I would conclude that he found me too strident, too vain about my judgments, and too strong-willed to take advantage of his advice. I dealt with him because the situation demanded that I do so. In private, I found him irritating and untrustworthy, and called him Polonius.

During this period of my life, I attended a production of *Hamlet* and rudely left at the interval. This was the fault not of the production but of my temperament. I was too impatiently aware of what was going to happen in terms of plot and poetry. The performance of Polonius, however, was fas-

Catharine R. Stimpson, a member of the SCHOLAR's Editorial Board, is University Professor and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University.

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cinating. He was no gabby old fool. The actor was dressed in a morning coat and ascot. He looked well tailored, well shaved. One could easily imagine that he had once been an amorous, love-frenzied young man, or a university student actor playing Julius Caesar, as Polonius did. Suave, smooth, and mature in manner, he was now a supremely confident high-court official. His advice to his son about social relations, friendship, violence, money, and existential authenticity made sense. When he got into difficulty, it was not because of pending senility but because of overconfidence about his schemes and his mastery of manipulative tactics.

Like those of all imagined characters of unusual force and palpability, Polonius's domains have expanded from literature to life, where he has become a label, a social category. Since my experiences of Polonius in literature and life, I have wondered who and what a Polonius in a modern state might be. He is, I have decided, a powerful figure in a large institution, preferably the executive branch of the federal government. However, he moves easily among institutions. He can work in the private sector or a think tank or a public policy school in an affluent private university. When he is not in the government, and is instead rusticating in the private sector, he likes being a pundit. In that role, he enjoys writing op-ed pieces and going on television. The pundit occupies a strategic space in contemporary public discourse. Although some female pundits exist, he is usually a man. The origins of the word are themselves masculine. *Pundit* derives from the Sanskrit *pandita,* which means "learned, wise; a learned man, a teacher, an authority; one who announces his judgment, opinions, or conclusions in an authoritative manner; a critic." The word entered English through Hindi, another appropriation from the era of the British rule of the Indian subcontinent.

Today, the figure of the pundit provokes ambivalent reactions: admiration but some sneers, sneers but some indifference, indifference but some envy. On the one hand, he has wisdom, expertise, and an insider's insights and material for gossip. Unlike "the spokesman," who proudly represents a known figure or cause, the pundit has a patina of nonpartisanship. He may have been in the trenches of partisan warfare, but he has then risen above the fray and settled into a more elevated public square. He is a talking head—the colloquial term for the informed television commentator—who is at home with headlines. Think tall, jowly David Gergen, acclaimed for being a reliable voice after having served four presidents from two parties. Unlike our sanctioned court jesters in the media, the pundit radiates an air of agreeable seriousness and decorum. Jay Leno may entertain at a White House correspondents' dinner and show risqué mock news clips of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright while goosing a foreign diplomat as the two of them stand behind a podium. The pundit would attend the dinner and afterward comment on the appropriateness of Leno's comic turn. Unlike an obsequious courtier or personal assistant, the pundit maintains

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his dignity and gravitas. He is no foppish Osric. On the other hand, the pundit may seem like an inflated balloon in need of pricking, a condescending teacher. This officious figure has spawned a rebellious offspring, the punk pundit, with brawny and belligerent manners and a hip haircut, who in America appears most often on our late-night, edgy talk shows. As my taxonomy of punditry reveals, the modern media have now spawned so many pundits that their authoritative voices blur and blend into a large, mildly disharmonious chorus. No single pundit rules.

It may be hard to imagine Polonius as a pundit. This is not because of the messy difficulties of transposing the dramatic setting of the Danish court of *Hamlet* and its Privy Councillor to that of a modern government and a high official. The difficulty is that the prevailing image of Polonius today is that of the boring, garrulous, fussy old meddler. Please note how my nickname for the man whom I introduced in my first paragraph perpetuates this stereotype. Polonius is tragedy's older counterpart of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, which was written at about the same time as *Hamlet*. It is as if Hamlet's assessment of Polonius as a "foolish prating knave" had become ours entirely. If Dr. Johnson, who gives Polonius some dignity and worldly smarts, writes that he is "dotage encroaching upon wisdom," our stereotype makes Polonius dotage fleeing from wisdom. For impotent J. Alfred Prufrock, by fate and character incapable of being Hamlet, an attendant lord or Polonius is his Shakespearean mirror image, "an easy tool / deferential, glad to be of use / Politic, cautious, and meticulous." When such a tediously risible Polonius dies like a rat, the audience is pleased. In 1978, Saul Bellow said meanly, "One of the nice things about *Hamlet* is that Polonius gets stabbed."

If we accept the stereotype, we shove aside a truth about Polonius: he is a very difficult, puzzling, and seemingly malleable character. These features have provoked contradictory readings and performances. For some, he may be a total buffoon; for others, he is a statesman. For some, he is a sexually prurient father who may have incestuous longings for his daughter; for others, he is decent and good enough to inspire the love of both his children. In the 1950s, *Shakespeare Quarterly* was the site of one learned quarrel about the degree of his foolishness. To excavate this quarrel is to do a small archaeology of the theoretically reticent literary criticism that held sway before the 1960s. The spat began with Josephine W. Bennett's "Characterization in Polonius's Advice to Laertes." Is it, she asks, a distillation of "practical wisdom" or a series of clichés, mere conventional wisdom? (The pundit, of course, traffics in conventional wisdom. If he were too unconventional, he would shock and scare away his audience.) Bennett's question is not only rhetorical. The degree of Polonius's "dignity" rests upon the answer. Like others, Bennett traces Polonius's advice to his son in act 1 to John Lyly, but both Lyly and Shakespeare, she argues, have as

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their source Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum.* "Shakespeare's audience," she claims, "could be trusted to recognize it as a familiar and conventional set of wise saws . . . schoolboy wisdom in the mouth of one . . . now entering his second childhood." Bennett then systematically slaps down any other claims to dignity that Polonius might have. He is not a "caricature" of Lord Burleigh. He thus lacks the standing that a significantly satiric figure might have. Although he works in the royal household, he is merely in charge of protocol and entertainment. He introduces ambassadors and arranges for theatricals. His role, Bennett writes, is like that of the "chief secretary of the White House." He thus lacks the standing that a deeply trusted counsel would have. Finally, his children might be fond of him, but it "does (not) follow that, because his children loved him, therefore he must have been worthy of their devotion." He thus lacks the standing that a revered patriarch would have.

Bennett's onslaught provoked Polonius's defenders. In "Isocrates' Precepts and Polonius's Character," G. K. Hunter flatly declares Bennett wrong. Shakespeare's audience, he argues, would find Polonius's advice sage, its conventionality a sign that it could be trusted, not scorned. Moreover, the Countess of Rousillon in *All's Well That Ends Well* offers parallel counsel. Polonius is in good company. As the audience goes deeper into the play, it learns that Polonius's advice is inadequate, but, Hunter suggests, this is less a comment on Polonius than on the "inadequacy of all advice" when we must confront the conditions the play dramatizes: regicide, ghosts of murdered kings, fratricide, adultery, incest, murder, and revenge. Joining but modifying Hunter is O. B. Davis's "A Note on the Function of Polonius's Advice," which makes Polonius the embodiment of the slippery, self-interested, and corner-cutting ethics of the Elsinore court. Polonius gives advice "to a young man on the make." Elkin Calhoun Wilson's "Polonius in the Round," a title that cutely puns on the roundness of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and E. M. Forster's sketch of complex literary characters as "round," is a more full-throated defense, one that finds Polonius much more than a "fool and a knave." To be sure, he is comic in his lectures and in the tenacity of his pursuit of the idea that spurned love is the motive for Hamlet's bizarre behavior. Although Wilson does not credit Henri Bergson's theory of comedy as rigid behavior in sudden conflict with contingency, his analysis of Polonius echoes it. However, Wilson concludes, Polonius also has a "minor tragic dimension." He loves his daughter and wants to help his kings, admirable motives that come to naught.

The Shakespearean Polonius is difficult, puzzling, and seemingly malleable for a reason. It makes strategic sense for him to be so. If he were easily and consistently knowable, easily and consistently interpretable, he could not do his job. He must be a man who knows more about people than they know about him. He accomplishes what he must accomplish—management of a small but tricky political world—by wearing masks, playing

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games, setting traps. His hiding behind the arras is one way of spying on the action of the court. He also conceals his considerable and considered ambitions. As Marvin Rosenberg writes, "Polonius is dangerous. His objective to begin with is to sustain the establishment, and make it work for himself and his family."

Moreover, he is a liminal character, moving away from a position of cognitive control. He has lost a beat or two. When he and Hamlet are initially talking to the traveling players, Hamlet ribs him by saying that he falls asleep at a performance unless it's a "jig or a tale of bawdry." He has fantasies of retiring and keeping a farm and carters. In normal conditions, his slowing down might be disguised and patched over, but normal conditions have become radically unsettled. Gertrude is still queen, but Claudius is now king, and Polonius must cope with him and maintain his position as influential court insider. Prince Hamlet, whom he has known since infancy, is acting up, acting out, coming on to his daughter, and calling him, Polonius, a fishmonger.

Most recently, John Updike, no more able to resist *Hamlet* than any other great writer, reimagined both Shakespeare and Shakespeare's sources in his novel *Gertrude and Claudius*. His Polonius, called Corambis, is secretive, watchful, and sly. He is portly, his hair is greasy, his mouth is fleshy and tremulous. Dressed in ludicrous tunics and sugarloaf-shaped hats, he is more grotesque than "my" Polonius.

As a progenitor of a modern pundit, "my" Polonius embodies more polished connections between power and language even if they are beginning to show some tarnish. He has his attractive features and character strengths. His public power is that of a high, experienced court official. He understands war and relations between Denmark and Norway, Poland, France, England. In part, his role is ceremonial. Implementing it, he seems to grasp the performative aspects of maintaining the highest office in the land—its spectacles, protocols, and rituals. He likes the blare of trumpets and the rustle of banners. In part, his role is that of a policymaker, and his long survival suggests he is probably very good. He likes spying and surveillance. Furthering his political and personal ends, Polonius can lie and equivocate. He knows this about himself. If there were telephones to tap, he would do it. If there were electronic bugs and tiny hidden cameras to plant, he would do that as well. When he sends an employee, Reynaldo, to spy on Laertes, the son who is a student at the University of Paris, he instructs Reynaldo expertly and, I suggest, with relish. Like all cunning liars, he knows that falsehood must be calibrated. He warns Reynaldo not to make so many false accusations against his son that Laertes will be dishonored. In brief, the student actor has transferred his love of stagecraft to a love of statecraft that demands dishonesty and disguise. He is a fine, seasoned conniver.

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However, he is not the king in a hierarchical court. He has power but not absolute power. He is at the right hand of royalty, but he is not royal. His voices reflect his position. On the one hand, he can be directive. As "The Mousetrap" plays on, and Hamlet interprets it, the frightened Claudius rises to go; it is Polonius who orders the play to stop. He can usher dignitaries in and out with aplomb. I might even say that he serves as a pundit for the small but significant audience of the court. He believes he can "find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the centre." Serving as a cultural pundit, he discusses the theater in a passage that has been mocked but that can be read as lighthearted criticism. He is also a family pundit for his children. Much of what he says is useful or sound. His voices are often rotund but essentially straightforward. When Hamlet kills him, his speech is as clear as it can be, "O, I am slain." However, on the other hand, Polonius can be obsequious and flattering when he speaks in the voice of those who must serve the powerful as well as wield power under their direction. Serving the powerful generally entails making them comfortable, even with bad news. Some of his speeches that might seem silly are actually soporific bromides, rhetorical tranquilizers to calm people enough to get them through difficult situations. Similarly, they might be verbal sugar coatings for the delivery of bitter information.

Take, for example, act 2, scene 2. It begins with Claudius and Gertrude hiring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to help them understand and control Prince Hamlet. They are now new, albeit junior, advisers to the king. In circles of power, any newcomer is a potential rival. Gertrude believes that Hamlet's transformation, his actions and distractions, are the result of his father's death and her over-hasty marriage, but she confides this only to Claudius. Polonius then enters with two pieces of good news. One is political. The ambassadors have returned with a deal favorable to Denmark. The second is domestic. He, Polonius, has found the "very cause of Hamlet's lunacy." The latter seems more compelling to Claudius than the former, but Polonius wants to defer giving the domestic news. It is, after all, a bit of a problem to tell your queen that her "noble son" is mad because he is gaga with love for your daughter and then to assure your king and queen that your primary loyalty and obedience is to them; that you are not trying to advance yourself by exploiting the prince's passion; that your daughter's primary loyalty and obedience is to you, her father, and not to the prince's love and lust; and that you will be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Polonius's technique is to soften up the royal couple by persuading them to hear out the successful ambassadors before hearing him out. That accomplished, he blathers on, risking the Queen's impatience, calculating that his deferrals will have the effect of making the royal couple want to cut through his rhetoric and get to the nugget of news. His climax is his description of Hamlet's swoon after Ophelia, following paternal orders, refuses to see him. Polonius cleverly combines a sequence of short descriptions of drastic ac-

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tions and alternating dactylic and trochaic rhythms that ease the blows:

> And he . . .
> Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
> Thence to a watch, then into a weakness,
> Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
> Into the madness wherein now he raves,
> And all we wail for.

It works. Persuaded, Claudius and Gertrude accept Polonius's scheme to entrap Hamlet, and exploit Ophelia, by having Ophelia encounter Hamlet while the King and his loyal counselor watch from behind that notorious arras. At its worst—an extreme that Polonius generally avoids—the language of deferential service becomes fawning, the "candied tongue lick(ing) absurd pomp / And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee." And fawning becomes sycophancy, which in English has several vulgar synonyms that speak to a perverse combination of love, appetite, self-abasement, toadying, and excrement.

Polonius has a second source of power as well, that of the patriarch. Here he is absolute. A widower, he can command his two children. The mood of the patriarch can be imperative, especially to his daughter. He demands that she tell him the truth about her relationship with Hamlet. He pooh-poohs her responses and tells her that she speaks "like a green girl," a foreshadowing of her death dressed in weeds and flowers. Structurally, of course, *Hamlet* plays the royal family off against the Privy Councillor's family, most dramatically Hamlet against Laertes as sons who must avenge their fathers. Although covertly, the first scene sets up the play's intricate correspondences between the two families. The extent of the thematic and dramatic relations between the two families makes plausible the possibility of interpreting Polonius's possessiveness of Ophelia as masked incestuous desires. If Gertrude and her brother-in-law are committing incest, could not Ophelia, the only other woman in the play except for a clump of ladies with their lords, be a shadowy representation of incest as well? And could she not be the victim of desire by both the father and the brother? After her death, Laertes will leap into her grave so that he can catch her "once more in mine arms." Only she, the compliant daughter and sister, is acted upon in the possibly incestuous drama, while Gertrude, the two-fold wife and once-foaled mother, acts in her clearly incestuous drama.

Polonius's hinge position between the court, where he exercises a power dependent upon his skill and position, and the home, where he exercises a power independent of anyone, is clear in his first scene. The new royal family, the Council, Polonius and his son, and Lords Attendant enter to a flourish of trumpets. Claudius with confidence and real competence summarizes the new state of things in Denmark. Then he summons Laertes and

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praises the bonds between the throne of Denmark and Polonius, who seems to have accepted the new order of things without a qualm or quiver. Laertes politely begs the King's permission to return to France. Claudius then asks if Polonius approves. Polonius's answer is his first speech, which reveals a son who must beg a father for permission to leave, and a father who must beg a monarch to endorse his permission:

> He hath, my lord, wrung from me my slow leave
> By laboursome petition, and at last
> Upon his will I sealed my hard consent.
> I do beseech you give him leave to go.

Polonius's immediate problem in the play is not the departure of his son but the romantic entanglements of his daughter with Prince Hamlet, back from Wittenberg University because of his father's death. Polonius, coping, fuses his role as court official and patriarch. Doing so, he has to juggle several unpleasant scenarios. The two scenarios that neither he nor his son can imagine are that the Prince and his daughter might actually be in love, or that the King and Queen, especially the Queen, might approve of their marriage. This inability to imagine love is a huge mistake. As a consequence, Polonius concludes that he has to protect his daughter's virginity, which is priceless. If she is not a virgin, the family has lost honor, a possibility that also worries Ophelia's brother. She is also far less marriageable. But what if Hamlet has slept with his daughter? Or is urging her to sleep with him? And what if she wants to sleep with him? Polonius must also protect his position at court. Hamlet appears to be a lunatic, although Polonius is too shrewd and too much of a faker himself not to wonder if there is method to his madness. But what if Hamlet really is crazy, and what if his love for Ophelia has driven him there? Will Claudius and Gertrude get angry at Polonius and by extension at Polonius's family? Will his position be threatened? And what if Hamlet might want to marry his daughter? Or his daughter to marry him? Doesn't he have more status than she? Would she look too ambitious? Wouldn't this be trouble for everyone?

Polonius's contribution to the destruction of Elsinore and to his self-destruction has its primary source in the anxious stupidity of his interpretations and the persistence with which he acts on them. Even when younger, he might have been as smug about his insights. Youthful as well as older politicians wreak havoc because of their certainties. Indeed, to focus on Polonius as a dodderer permits us to align his errors with age—not with the cognitive arrogance of power. Even though Polonius is a corporate partner in the death and waste of Elsinore, his last action has a tattered shred of decency. He calls Hamlet's attention to himself in his hiding place because he hears Gertrude calling for help and echoes her. And Hamlet, notoriously, thinks Polonius is Claudius and kills him: the act that really does Hamlet

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in, that seals Claudius's decision to destroy him in order to secure Claudius's kingship and that initiates Laertes' decision to kill him in order to revenge Polonius. The combination of having fomented bloody loss and yet inspiring genuine grief cloaks Polonius's ghost after his death and unceremonious burial. As Laertes angrily reminds Claudius, his father has had "No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones." Since the state has tactically chosen to ignore his death, all of Polonius's memorials must be familial. One is his daughter's dirge, sung before her death. A second is his son's revenge. Like the father, the son is a negotiator, who is willing to enter into sinister schemes and who bargains with Claudius over the terms and conditions of his revenge. The third memorial is more subtle. Before her funeral, a sequence of voices marks Ophelia's drowning: that of Gertrude, then that of Laertes, and then, in a grim and comic counterpoint, those of the two clowns who are digging her grave. They imply that she will receive a Christian burial because the status-conscious coroner has found her not guilty of suicide. Her social position, which her father has worked so diligently to maintain, at last protects her.

What contemporary scenarios might one imagine for Polonius? Like *pundit, scenario* has become a common term in our business and political lexicons. A scenario both imagines a future and shows how to handle it. A scenario can be designed for a movie or a play, but more likely, it depicts what a corporation or nonprofit organization or striver might do. "Where do you want to be in five years?" a strategic planning consultant might ask a group. "What's your scenario?" An up-to-date Polonius is easily pictured in a small, rich, arms-ridden, authoritarian country. Here families still control political power, here political violence is endemic, and here a brilliant son might return to an uncle's ascension from his more carefree days as a student at Harvard, Oxford, or the Sorbonne. Think a cognate of Iraq or Syria. Polonius could be a government official in such countries, but he could not be a pundit, because they lack the press freedoms that encourage punditry. A Polonius is also plausible if Hamlet is transposed to a family-run corporation called Denmark. This move is the controlling conceit of the visually arresting and dazzlingly ingenious movie *Hamlet,* released in 2000, which starred Ethan Hawke as the Prince. The actor Bill Murray, known for contemporary comedy, is a beautifully effective Polonius: a light-voiced, schedule-conscious, well-dressed, trusted corporate counselor, first seen vigorously applauding Claudius at a stockholders' meeting. He is a loving single parent who nevertheless places corporate interests, and his own interest in these interests, over his daughter's well-being. As Ophelia cries, he skillfully—and perhaps slightly salaciously—wires her for a conversation with the increasingly problematic and eccentric young scion Hamlet.

Neither of these scenarios takes place in a modern democracy. The

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question of what a Polonius might be like in a political tragedy set in a modern democracy provokes the deeper question of whether a political tragedy in a modern democracy is possible. The classical conventions of political tragedy—that alliance of the dramas of big rulers, ruling families and the state—function awkwardly for a modern democracy. *Hamlet* uses these conventions with Shakespearean depth. (In one way, *Othello* breaks them. The tragic hero is both a servant of the state, albeit a heroic general, and, as Moor of Venice, a partial outsider. In another way, however, *Othello* maintains them. Desdemona is no partner outsider but the daughter of a ruling family.) In contemporary America, only the myth of the Kennedys—their heroic men shot down by lesser figures—keeps the canons of political tragedy woefully alive. The Kennedys continue to fuse the fates of a compelling individual, a family, and the state. Otherwise, our political imaginations must feed on different substances.

Now fathers and sons of political families have to work hard to establish dynasties. They must go through elections, although they have the competitive advantages of fame and strong fund-raising prowess when they campaign. They must take account of the ambitions of daughters. When even the most charismatic politician achieves office, he finds power assigned throughout institutions that check and balance each other. Classical tragedy has focus and concentration. Modern democratic political tragedy has networks and sprawl. Actors mesh, connect, disconnect, and reconnect with one another. They also breathe within webs of bureaucratic institutions. Interacting with one another, interacting with their agencies, they are too mobile and yet aligned with others to be assigned individual responsibility for tragic effects on others or on the environment. Moreover, overt physical violence and shooting wars are no longer respectable political choices within national boundaries. Modern democratic politicians have found the moral equivalents of war through investigative hearings, spin doctors, negative ads, debates, and such media events as "Crossfire." The material equivalents of the poisoned chalice and rapier have been relegated to assassins, domestic terrorists, and rogue cops.

My Polonius must operate within such a scenario. However, the loss of a clear narrative line and of a centripetal figure do not create a vacuum that he will fill. He lacks the poetry and intensity of a grand tragic figure. He would have had an excellent education, including graduate and/or professional training. He has read Shakespeare. He might have taken a joint law and business degree. He is very intelligent, and his is not entirely an instrumental intelligence. When he was young, he had a wild streak. He might have drunk too much, or smoked pot, or done both. Whatever he did, it did not mar his résumé. He or his family might have fixed a DWI ticket or two. He is now older. He has bought a country home for his retirement in a university town—perhaps in Charlottesville, or Raleigh-Durham, or Seattle. He is, however, loath to retire. He would miss the

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game. Moreover, his children are only in their twenties, and he still has financial obligations to them. He likes to think of himself as a modern father, and he cares deeply for his children, and gets upset if he does not know what they are doing, especially his daughter. He tells his friends that he would like her to go to his own law school but that he is still an old-fashioned man when it comes to the young man in his girl's life. He is a widower. Before her death, of ovarian cancer, his wife did respected volunteer work in Washington, D.C. He now dates, and watches some pornographic films, but he has not married again.

Playing the game, he could belong to the moderate wing of either major political party. The actual party affiliation is irrelevant. He belongs to the permanent government, and has functioning networks. When he is in government, he is an appointed official. He has no desire to run for office. He might be a deputy assistant secretary of state, or a top staffer at the National Security Council, or a deputy director of the CIA. He lacks the gall and brass to go for the top jobs. He is proud of the way he handles his superiors—good-humored, courteous, ostensibly loyal, full of well-timed jocularity. His jobs require him to receive classified materials. He hints at the power he has because he knows secrets. He likes it when journalists use him as "a protected source," and he is very good at leaks.

When he is not in office, he has his pick of joining a law firm, or a major corporate communications firm, or a highly prestigious think tank, particularly one that is concerned with security issues. He serves on official commissions and committees, and one or two corporate boards, and has a museum membership and theater subscription. In memory of his wife, he is on an advisory committee of a cancer research group. What he truly enjoys is being a pundit. Modernity and its communications technologies have granted him an audience a Renaissance Polonius never had. His promise to his audience is that his jobs may have forced him to do painful or deceptive things for the sake of national security, but that he will now be as truthful as the vows made during his career in national security permit him to be. Whenever there is a crisis in foreign or defense affairs, he is on TV, silver hair combed back, in a dark suit, analyzing, pontificating a little. Younger experts roll their eyes when they see him, but they might be envious of him. He declines invitations to appear on the raucous shows on Fox TV or some cable channels. He prefers the more sanitized experts of CNN or PBS or, when he is lucky, the Sunday morning talk shows. He lets it be known that he has been through crises before and knows how to manage them. He is the consummate insider. His language is utterly conventional. Members of the avant-garde are prophets, not pundits. His résumé, and his command of hearable public rhetoric, give him credibility. He often tells his son how important it is to be credible.

How does Polonius, our pundit, die? Things ought to be hunky-dory. His party is in power. He is now in the White House, at the National Security

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Council. The president and his family are old friends, although the president's re-election was controversial, because he was the first to be divorced while in office. Polonius's son, having gotten his law degree and then worked for an international consulting company, is taking an extended vacation. Against his father's better judgment, he is sailing around the world. The president's second wife, an athletic woman, has told Polonius not to be an old fussbudget and let the boy go. He is, however, worried about his daughter, a fragile girl, who may be dating the president's son from his first marriage, known for being odd and wild and hard to control and more radical than his father. Polonius, however, gets caught in a bad power struggle about a major issue, and despite his affable maneuverings, he has made enemies over the years. There are leaks about both sexual harassment and possible improprieties having to do with foreign contracts; there are threats of a Congressional investigation. He is forced to resign. He misses his staff and his secretary. Although he talks to publishers about a book contract, his value as a pundit is diminished. Now we might imagine several alternative scenarios. If he knows too much, and if his enemies are unusually vengeful and vicious, he might die "accidentally"—a helicopter crash when he is visiting a foreign dignitary who still keeps in touch with him, or a mysterious stabbing on a towpath by the Potomac while he is jogging. More benignly, he might die, angry and disappointed, of a heart attack. His daughter mourns him, but she also dies soon afterward of a drug overdose. The son returns home, and must mourn both sister and father. He is convinced that one of his father's enemies hooked his sister on drugs and that all of his father's enemies conspired against him. Although he wants to resume his career and be successful, he works on a biography of his father. His girlfriend helps him. A small vanity press ultimately publishes it. It is called, without a hint of irony, *To His Own Self He Was True.*

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The Years with Kolatch

Life at America's Most Significant Obscure Magazine

BEN YAGODA

My first job was as an assistant editor with the biweekly *New Leader* magazine. Then—1976—as now, *The New Leader* was not widely known. I was fresh out of college, and when I proudly told a former professor of mine about being hired, his wisecrack was, "Is that a fishing magazine?" (The former professor was David Milch, who went on to fashion better lines as an executive producer of *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue.*) The truth is, I didn't have much of an idea exactly what it was. My shorthand description, for him and for others who responded to the news with a blank look, was, "Kind of like *The New Republic,* only not as famous," which was similar to saying, "Kind of like celery sticks, only not as fattening."

I had stumbled into *The New Leader*'s orbit the previous summer. My father, as a young man, had been a labor organizer and then a mediator, and had made the acquaintance of Mitchel "Mike" Levitas, a *New York Times* reporter on the labor beat. Levitas was now an editor at the *Times,* and my father asked if he would take a few minutes to talk to me about journalism careers. Given that he was looking across a desk at a more or less clueless young man with little experience and no manifestations of talent, Levitas was understandably noncommittal during our conversation. But toward the end of it, he said he knew of a magazine that assigned book reviews to untried writers. He wrote the name "Mike Kolatch" and a telephone number on a slip of paper.

Ben Yagoda is Professor of English at the University of Delaware. He is the author of *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* and *Will Rogers: A Biography*, and co-editor of *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism.*

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Then as now, Myron "Mike" Kolatch was *The New Leader*'s editor. I called on him soon afterward at the magazine's offices on Fifth Avenue, near Twenty-sixth Street. He was a neat and dapper man in his midforties, with curly graying hair and a pencil-thin mustache. He shook my hand and led me into a room containing waist-high piles of review copies and bound galleys of new books. I emerged with a promising-looking novel and a deadline. I was so delighted when the review was published that it didn't occur to me to wonder why I wasn't paid for it. I graduated from college some months later—just, it so happened, as one of the magazine's two assistant editors decided to leave. I got the job, a cubicle, and a $7,500 salary. In return, I had to promise to stay for two years. "You'll get a better education than journalism school," Mike told me.

Never having been to journalism school, I can't judge the truth of his statement. But I have no doubt that I did learn some things at *The New Leader*. One was how to come up with multiple synonyms for *but* on short notice. Another was that the human will has more powerful capabilities than you might expect.

For reasons I will explain shortly, the nature of the job was such that on alternate Wednesdays, Thursdays, Mondays, and Tuesdays, Mike, the other assistant editor, Stan Luxenberg, and I—who among us made up the editorial staff—worked until midnight, when the building closed down and we left. I say "worked," but the fact was that frequently, after we returned from our dinner among the cabdrivers at the Belmore Cafeteria on Park Avenue South, Stan and I had nothing to do. We were in pre-Dilbert-era glass-partitioned cubicles. I'm not sure how Stan occupied himself during these long hours, silent except for the periodic tapping of Mike's pipe against his ashtray as he edited in the adjoining office, but I did a lot of reading. I dipped into the review-copy room (for some reason, I remember a night when I polished off the autobiography of defensive lineman Lyle Alzado), and I spent a lot of time looking at the bound back issues of *The New Leader*. These dated from the 1940s, and the first thing that struck me about them was the collection of notable names on the masthead. Not as editor-in-chief, where turnover was nil. Samuel "Sol" Levitas, Mitchel's father, had occupied this post from 1936 until his death in 1961; Mike had taken over the following year. It was the roster of subeditors that was striking, especially in its implicit promise of the future that might await me. The Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell had served in the 1940s. In later years, the names included Hilton Kramer, Michael Janeway, Diane Ravitch, Joseph Epstein, James R. Mellow, and Kirkpatrick Sale, all of whom had gone on to notable journalistic or literary careers. (One night Mike told me about a period in the late fifties or early sixties when a Cornell buddy of Sale's, in New York without a place to stay, slept in the magazine's offices for a couple of weeks. The buddy was Thomas Pynchon.)

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As I looked through the bound volumes and listened to Mike's occasional reminiscences (he himself had started as an assistant editor in 1953), I learned something about the magazine's past. It had been founded in 1924 by Norman Thomas and others as a Socialist Party organ. In the midthirties, the Socialist Party split, with the militants lunging leftward and the old guard resisting. *The New Leader* aligned itself with the latter group and soon severed its connection with the party. Levitas, a Russian Menshevik who had been smuggled out of Vladivostok to flee the Bolshevik Revolution, assumed the editorship in what Mike described as "the Mensheviks' only successful revolution." A large group of like-minded émigrés followed him to *The New Leader*'s offices. The political scholar and writer John P. Roche, when he started writing for the magazine in the late 1930s, was taken aback to find Aleksandr Kerensky, the leader of the pre-Bolshevik Russian provisional government, hanging around the offices. "It was the most incredible collection of people, sitting around talking in German, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian about what should have been done in Russia in 1907," Roche reminisced to a *New York Times* interviewer. "I remember a couple of them predicting the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939."

From those days on, *The New Leader* cast a cold and comprehensive eye on the Soviet Union, and frequently skirmished with its left-wing counterparts, *The Nation* and *The New Republic,* on the issue of how evil the empire was. In 1956, when the Hungarian uprising had just begun, the magazine sent a cable to Belgrade asking Milovan Djilas, the former vice president of Yugoslavia, whether he would write an article. Djilas was jailed within days of the appearance of his *New Leader* essay, which was a predecessor to his book *The New Class.* The magazine was the first in this country to print the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and it published, in 1964, a smuggled transcript of the poet Joseph Brodsky's trial on charges of "parasitism." Generally, *The New Leader* situated itself in the political tradition of social democracy, which has never really taken hold in this country; this partially explains its relative obscurity. But the magazine was host to many international writers sympathetic to that stance, including George Orwell, Willy Brandt, Vladimir Nabokov, Juan Bosch, Bertrand Russell, and Arthur Koestler.

Domestically, though Mike took pride in being aggressively nondoctrinaire and though there was some kinship with the "neoconservatism" then being formulated by people like Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, the magazine's politics tended to be of the old-liberal, New Deal, pro-civil-rights variety, with strong ties to the labor moment. It had printed some striking authors and articles, including Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in 1963. (Always on the lookout for reasonably priced copy, Mike had picked the essay up after it had appeared in a small periodical issued by the Society of Friends.) Frequent contributors included the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr, Theodore Draper, Robert Lekachman, and Bayard Rustin. There was some good stuff in the back of the book. Stanley

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Edgar Hyman was the literary critic for several years, and James Baldwin was a regular reviewer before he was anointed by fame. The movie reviewer in the early sixties was "Mike" Herr; as Michael, he would soon go to Vietnam to cover the war for *Esquire,* and he eventually published the classic book *Dispatches.* The music writer at roughly the same time was Albert Goldman, later to pen gonzo biographies of John Lennon, Lenny Bruce, and Elvis Presley.

The writers who were appearing in the magazine when I arrived were a solid bunch. Regular columnists included Roche, Walter Goodman of the *Times,* and a fine essayist named Richard Margolis. The theater critic was John Simon, the television critic was Marvin Kitman of *Newsday,* the book critic was the very sharp Pearl K. Bell (Daniel's wife and Alfred Kazin's sister), and the film critic was Robert Asahina (soon to become a prominent book editor). An intriguing group of contributors turned out the pointed pieces that made up the feature well: TV reporters like Daniel Schorr, Bob Schieffer, George Herman, and Richard C. Hottelet; foreign newspapermen who had, generally, a shaky command of the English language but who often provided a more nuanced and informed view of happenings in their homelands than what you could find in *Newsweek* or the *Times;* usual suspects from think tanks and academia; and, on occasion, notable personages like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Elie Wiesel, who for some reason viewed *The New Leader* as a sympathetic platform. Periodically young people would come through the offices for an audience with Mike and emerge, as I had, with a review copy. I recall making the acquaintance of Eric Breindel (who became editorial page editor of the *New York Post,* and died in his early forties), Anna Quindlen, and Cokie Roberts.

I readily understood this group's motivation—to get published—but I had a harder time figuring out why the notables wrote for *The New Leader.* True, they were reaching a discriminating and loyal audience, but also an extremely tiny audience: the annual statement of circulation listed 30,000 or so paid readers, but Stan Luxenberg and I came to think this number was significantly inflated, and, in any case, a good number of the copies went straight to libraries. The magazine had no scholarly standing, so professors couldn't amass academic brownie points by appearing in it. Nor, at this point, could contributors expect to create controversy or even conversation. The magazine was once at or at least near the center of a certain politico-journalistic conversation, but to the extent that that conversation still existed, *The New Leader* had no real part in it. We rarely received letters to the editor, and in my wanderings around Manhattan I never heard the magazine talked about and never observed it being read. The only printed reference I saw was when an ad for a foreign film, apparently desperate for a blurb, quoted a line from Asahina's review. Were it not for that, and for the occasional glimpse of a copy on a particularly well-stocked newsstand, I would have suspected that it existed only in my imagina-

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tion—as if I were spending my days in a journalistic *Twilight Zone* episode.

To get back to our contributors' motivation—it certainly wasn't financial. Book reviewers, including such eminences as Harold Bloom, Hans J. Morgenthau, Adam Ulam, and Richard Pipes, were compensated, as I had been, with a review copy and a letter of thanks, and other writers' fees were in what Calvin Trillin (himself an occasional contributor) described as "the high two figures." The payment policy, I should point out, was a matter of necessity rather than cheapness: the magazine's revenue stream was barely a trickle. We accepted advertising but, except for an occasional one-column spot from a university press, never got any. Every two weeks, when an issue was being put to bed, one of my jobs was to pick out a public service ad from our rotating collection (stamp out forest fires, buy savings bonds, be aware of breast cancer) to slap on the back cover. Circulation did not add much, and other than a vague sense of incoming grants of some kind, I couldn't say where the money came from to pay for rent, production costs, postage, and four salaries (the fourth went to Barbara Shapiro, who was and still is office manager, comptroller, circulation manager, secretary, and receptionist), not to mention author fees. The one source of funding I did know about was the Strand Bookstore. Every few months a representative from that establishment would come in and clear out the review-copy room, paying 25 percent of the cover price per volume. The one fringe benefit Stan and I enjoyed (we had no health insurance or benefits of any kind, somewhat ironic given the magazine's association with labor) was getting first dibs on the books, provided we could match the Strand's price.

Job titles are fanciful at many magazines, but for Stan and me (and later Dean Valentine, who came on after Stan's two years were up—funny how it never struck us as odd that the assistant editors were always young men, never young women), the job title was absolutely descriptive. We were assistants, and we edited. Some of our duties were not much different, I imagine, from what our contemporaries at *Commonweal* and *The Nation* were doing. It was the very end of the hot type era, and every day during closing week, we'd be delivered long sheets of coarse paper covered with type: the galleys. One copy was for proofreading. We'd get to work on the other with a pair of scissors and a glue pot, laying out the issue on big pieces of cardboard with the dimensions of the magazine indicated in light blue print. There was no art director per se, but years before, Herb Lubalin, a noted designer, had contributed a template that was elegant, durable, and flexible enough so that we three editors could plug in the contents of a given issue and be confident that it would look pretty good. On alternate Wednesdays, we would spend the day at the printing plant in Bayonne, New Jersey, checking page proofs as they came off the press. (Midway through my time at *The New Leader,* Mike bowed to the inevitable and switched to cold type, and a word processor—person and machine—came onto the premises.)

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The distinctive part of *New Leader* editing was the stage that came before proofreading and layout: the treatment of the author's copy. What was placed in front of us was often along the lines of a first draft, understandable given the level of the contributors' compensation. Applying the usual adjustments of grammar, spelling, capitalization, and so on was only the beginning of our task. After that the real job began. Using any means at our disposal (deleting, adding, or substituting words or phrases; transposing paragraphs; wholesale rewriting), we were to massage the piece until it conformed to Mike's very strict and somewhat idiosyncratic standards of euphony, logical consistency, and "flow." Each part of this trinity had corollaries. He was a stickler, not to say an obsessive, about word repetition, which led to odd elegant variations, such as calling Israel "the Jewish State" and Mao Tse-tung "the Great Helmsman." For some reason, he was especially vigilant about the excessive use of *but,* which he defined as more than once every six or seven paragraphs. I quickly developed a mental list of substitutes, which I can still run through at a dinner party when the conversation is lagging: *yet, though, however, nevertheless* (or *nonetheless*—you couldn't use both in the same piece), *still,* and (getting more baroque) *at the same time, by the same token,* and *be that as it may.* Mike is an orthodox Jew, and though he never talked about religion, I couldn't help wondering whether he had been a serious student of the Talmud—such was his attention to what seemed to me minor or nonexistent internal contradictions. He would, in any case, seize on a statement in paragraph three that in his mind didn't gibe with one in paragraph fourteen, and call for some acknowledgment or explanation to be made in the latter passage. As for flow, his watchword was that pieces should move "like water"—which, in his New York cadence, came out sounding the same as Linda Richman's "like butter." One result was an abundance of transitional phrases, sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. *New Leader* pieces were studded, like a fruitcake, with the likes of *meanwhile, to be sure, in any event, similarly, interestingly, that is, of course, indeed, as a result, moreover, for example, needless to say,* and, needless to say, all the *but*-substitutes.

It is not unusual for a magazine to have its own idiosyncratic style: *Time* and *The New Yorker* did for decades. But they had large staffs of editors to process the prose. At *The New Leader,* there were only the three of us. After Stan or I had finished with a piece, we passed it on to Mike, who would often, without rancor, rip apart all our changes and start in anew. This was the reason for the late nights on the week the magazine was closing. (We were excused early on Fridays, when Mike had to be home before sunset.) His editing style was methodical in the extreme; he once told me (without much exaggeration, I think) that after he had finished working on a piece, he could recite it from memory. As the hour struck seven, then eight and nine, we waited, both because it would be unseemly to go home while he still labored and because, chances were, we would eventually be summoned

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into his office to be asked some question or merely to observe him as he worked. When I want to conjure up a mental picture of concentration, I still think of Mike working on a piece of copy, patiently staring at a sentence until finally deciding how it should read. Before writing in the chosen words, he would flip his mechanical pencil upside down and erase the somehow deficient solution I had devised. Then he would gather the eraser shards together into a little pink ball, press down on it with his index finger, pick it up like a magnet, and deposit the remnants of my words in his green glass ashtray.

I left the magazine precisely two years after I started. The intense and isolated working conditions had begun to get to me. Our art critic, a sardonic Englishwoman named Vivian Raynor, came up one day and remarked—with some degree of shock, I think—that the mise-en-scène was "Dickensian." Vivian's appearance was rare; our contributors seldom came into the office. (John Simon did show up now and then. Once he dropped off his review of the all-black production of *Guys and Dolls* and suggested, in his distinctive middle European accent, a headline for the review—"Dudes and Chicks," the slang outdated even then.)

I spent a fair amount of time mulling over the "Which is better, *New Leader* or journalism school?" question and, as I say, came up with no definitive answer. My time there did teach me to take apart a sentence, a paragraph, a piece, in the manner of a Marine with his rifle, which is probably a useful skill to have. For some years after leaving, I tended to write with an overdeveloped sense of structure and flow. In short, I used phrases like *in short* too much. Eventually, I think, I managed to extract the useful elements of the Kolatchian code—most notably, an *awareness* of what every sentence is doing, and how an imaginary reader may be responding—from the dullness, overliteralness, and impersonality it sometimes led to.

Of one thing there was no doubt: the *New Leader* pipeline to the major leagues of journalism and publishing, if it ever existed, was by then officially shut down. The place to have been in the late 1970s (it's clear in hindsight) was Charles Peters's *Washington Monthly,* which had recently sent or was about to send the likes of Jonathan Alter, Taylor Branch, Gregg Easterbrook, James Fallows, Michael Kinsley, Nicholas Lemann, Joseph Nocera, and Walter Shapiro off to impressive careers. *The New Leader,* at that point, was so far out of the loop it wasn't funny. I sent out a couple of dozen résumés to notables who had written or worked for the magazine and got some nice letters in return, but no offers. (It wasn't just me. I believe that the only *New Leader* assistant editor from the seventies and after to gain any kind of fame is my contemporary Dean Valentine, who after a couple of magazine jobs switched from journalism to television. He was until recently head of the UPN network.) I decided to hang out my shingle as a freelance writer. Implicit in that occupation is a need to make money from one's free-

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lance writing. So I did not approach Mike Kolatch with any ideas for pieces. He didn't approach me, either.

Time passed and had its way with me and everything else in the world, but not *The New Leader.* I still never heard anybody talk about it, and not even the information revolution could lift it from obscurity. (I just now typed "*New Leader* magazine" into Google.com and was presented with an almost inconceivably tiny list of twenty-six Web pages, one of which listed "new articles" in *Leader Magazine,* the official periodical of Canadian scouting. Most of the rest, for some reason, contained thumbnail biographies of erstwhile television critic Marvin Kitman.) But the magazine continued. I would pick up a newsstand copy every year or so, and find that *it was exactly the same.* The same design and typeface. The same mix of articles and reviews, with a public service ad on the back cover. The same house ads ("It makes dollars and sense to become a regular subscriber"). And the same writers: Walter Goodman, John Simon, Ray Alan, Andrew J. Glass, Phoebe Pettingell, Eliahu Salpeter, Donald Kirk, Darryl D'Monte, David M. Oshinsky, Hope Hale Davis, Gus Tyler, and on and on. Most of these names may hold no meaning for you, reader, but for me they are a madeleine-level nostalgia cocktail.

One or two things did change. Under Mike's name on the masthead, a new assistant editor used to appear roughly every two years. A decade or so ago, there started to be only a single name in this slot, as opposed to the traditional two, suggesting that the magazine had become even more of a one-man operation. There also appeared to be a higher level of candor in the annual Statement of Circulation. The one in the final issue of 2001 listed a paid circulation of 10,650.

One day in the spring of 2001, almost precisely twenty-five years after I first reported for work, I walked into *The New Leader*'s offices. I was there because, contrary to conventional wisdom, youth doesn't really want to know—it's actually middle age that's curious. As an archetypal first job, my *New Leader* experience fits smoothly into the account of my professional life I tell myself and others, but over the years I found myself musing on the one big question: How, without profits, prominence, or even modest circulation, has Mike Kolatch managed to keep the magazine alive all these years? And so I phoned him and asked if I could come in for a chat.

Beforehand, I did some research. In the years since I'd left the magazine, a number of books about "the New York intellectuals" had appeared. *The New Leader* tended to be mentioned glancingly, if at all, and its existence after, say, 1960 was almost never acknowledged. The perception of the magazine generally depended on the politics of the author. Coming from the left, Alan Wald, in *The New York Intellectuals* , wrote disdainfully that *The New Leader* "was generally regarded as a halfway house for right-wing social-democratic anticommunists from which virtually no one returned." On the other hand, Mary McAuliffe, in *Crisis On the Left: Cold War Politics and*

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American Liberals, 1947–1954, commended *The New Leader* for recognizing "that the international and domestic Communist menace was real."

The most provocative material I found was in Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters,* published in 1999. Saunders writes that in the early 1950s, Sol Levitas approached Tom Braden of the CIA's International Organizations Division and said that without an infusion of money, *The New Leader* would go under and a valuable anti-Communist voice would be lost; Braden recalled coming up with cash donations of about $30,000. In addition, according to the book, between 1953 and the early 1960s, Time Inc. paid *The New Leader* $5,000 a year in exchange for what the contract between the two organizations termed "information on world-wide Communist tactics and personalities, with particular reference to Communist activities within the Labor movement."

Saunders did not address the issue of *The New Leader*'s funding in the sixties and beyond. Nor did she or anyone else have anything to say about why, in the absence of payment or prestige, the magazine was able to attract writers, year after year. I actually had a hunch on that point. A couple of years ago, Mike called me and asked me to write a book review. I have a lot of obligations, I have a mortgage, nobody I know reads *The New Leader,* I was not especially interested in the subject of the book, and I regard writing as work, not fun. Why, then, did I say yes? I suppose because for an odd mix of reasons—flattery, loyalty, some inchoate sense of obligation, the Judeo-Christian work ethic, and the realization that it might be impossible to refuse without sounding rude—it was easier to say yes than no.

I phoned Reuven Frank, one of the pioneers of television news and a former president of NBC News, who has been *The New Leader*'s television critic for nearly a decade, and got the sense that it was somewhat the same with him. He told me that he had always been aware of *The New Leader* because his father, M. Z. Frank, a Russian émigré journalist, was a devotee of the magazine. "I retired in '88," Frank said, "and in 1992 Mike called and said he was working up the back of the book—would I be interested in writing about the Democratic convention? Nobody had suggested anything like that to me before."

Every once in a while Frank gets overtures from other magazines. He said he is not tempted: "I owe Mike Kolatch—he asked me to do it." Besides, he said, he finds the magazine a congenial environment. "Its original purpose no longer exists, but it keeps going, mainly because Mike keeps it going. It's not *The New Republic,* it's not *The Nation.* You get a sense that those magazines are part of a permanent campaign. *The New Leader* is not. It's cozier. You find things in it you don't expect—all of a sudden, there will be a piece about Quebec politics."

I was too polite to ask my next question, but Frank, with his journalistic background, sensed it. "I know what you're getting at—why do I do it for so little money? Part of it is that I'm a retired guy, and something to do is very desirable."

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Shaking Mike Kolatch's hand, I had the sense that a not very accomplished makeup man had been asked to apply a quarter-century to my old boss. The curly hair and the mustache were white, he was wearing bifocals, he was maybe five pounds heavier, his face had a few wrinkles . . . otherwise, it was the same guy. After we settled in his office (not the same: the magazine moved west to Seventh Avenue more than a decade ago), I asked him about the CIA connection. He said he had no direct knowledge: Sol Levitas had always kept all money matters close to the vest—he even kept the review copies locked up in his office—and by the time Mike came on as editor, the flow of cash had long since dried up.

Mike told me that he did not grow up in a Menshevik or even a political household (he said his father was an accountant, shedding some light on Mike's editing style), and that, like me, he had never heard of *The New Leader* until late in his college years. Also like me, he was introduced to the magazine by Mike Levitas. "I was editor of the NYU student newspaper, and all the college papers in the city used to be printed at a shop on Avenue A and Fourth Street. Some friends of mine worked on the Brooklyn College *Vanguard,* and they introduced me to the editor, who was Mike."

He was drafted after graduation—the Korean War was on—and served as editor of the Fort Dix *Post.* When he was discharged, in 1953, Mike Levitas mentioned that a job was available at his father's magazine. Mike Kolatch had always thought he would go into newspaper reporting, but this seemed like an interesting opportunity. Eight years later, he hadn't budged. Then Sol Levitas, who had been synonymous with the magazine for a quarter of a century, died. Mike told me, "There was a serious question as to whether the magazine would continue. The board was ambivalent. I suggested that if *The New Leader* folded, it would hardly be a fitting memorial to Levitas. They figured, 'What do we have to lose?'"

Following the example of Max Ascoli's *The Reporter,* Mike took the magazine from a weekly to a biweekly. Editorially, he attempted to beef up *The New Leader*'s traditional strong suit, coverage of foreign affairs. "I had developed a high regard for the past of the magazine, in the late forties and the fifties—it focused on the Soviet Union when no one else did. If you were George Kennan and wanted to write about the Soviets, you had to do it in *The New Leader.*"

The finances were the tricky part. Mike learned that Levitas was a master at soliciting and juggling a variety of revenue streams. "He was a master *schnorrer,*" he said, using a Yiddish word loosely translatable as "sponger." "He'd stop people on the street and ask for a cigarette, and leave with the whole pack." Mike had no such skills, and even though the magazine had rent-free offices at the former Rand School on East Fifteenth Street, it was always on the verge of bankruptcy.

We adjourned to lunch at a small Italian restaurant on Eighth Avenue. The staff greeted Mike like a long-lost friend. He explained that he had often

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eaten dinner there during late nights at the office, but that the late nights were no longer. Bowing, somewhat, to finances and age, he had taken the magazine bimonthly a year before. All the editing could be done in business hours!

But rent and salaries and so on still had to be paid. I asked him how he did it. He explained that one of the magazine's longtime supporters had been the Tamiment Institute, which also operated a significant library of labor and political history and some property in the Pocono Mountains. This property had originally been a rustic retreat where interested parties could discuss the intricacies of social democracy and anarcho-syndicalism. But by the sixties it had become the Tamiment Lodge, a very successful resort known for its Robert Trent Jones–designed golf course and its Playhouse, where Danny Kaye, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen had trod the boards. Realizing that the Lodge was no longer serving its original purpose, the Institute put it on the market. And it gave a good portion of the proceeds—a little less than two million—to *The New Leader.*

"So it's like an endowment?" I asked.

"No," Mike said. "An endowment spends only the interest. We spent the principal and the interest."

"That means the money will eventually run out."

"Right."

"So when does it run out?"

"Funny you should ask. It ran out this year."

But that does not, Mike explained, mean the end of *The New Leader.* He has some funds socked away that will take it at least through the next few issues. And after that? "If you run across anyone with a lot of money to spend, send him my way."

Lunch was over. I made motions to pick up the check. Mike would have none of it. "I'll get my money's worth out of this," he said.

Back at the office, I saw what he meant. He showed me three books that he had picked out of the review-copy room and asked if I would review one of them for the magazine.

Sure, I said.

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Juan Luis Arsuaga

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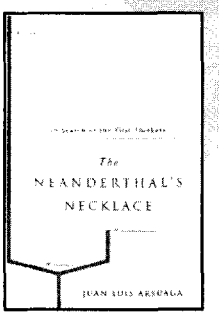

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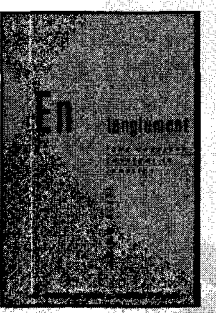

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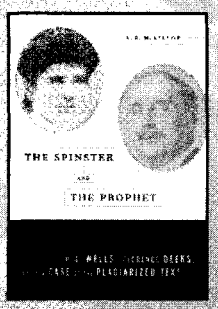

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THE UNCERTAIN ART

Hippocrates Redux

SHERWIN B. NULAND

On June 24, 1889, a youth of twenty—forever after to be memorialized in the literature of medicine by his initials, G. H.—was punitively discharged from The Johns Hopkins Hospital eight days after an operation. Only the second patient to have undergone a newly devised method of hernia repair, he had been found guilty of "insubordination." His offense? In the words by which he is fated to be remembered for as long as medical historians study the origins of modern surgical techniques, "Patient got out of bed several times and took cathartic pills without permission." The punishment decreed by the surgeon, William Halsted, was nothing compared with that meted out by the young man's seemingly taxed tissues. Three years later, the repentant G. H. returned to the hospital with a palpable loop of squishy bowel in his scrotum, signifying "a complete return of the hernia." Of the first ten patients followed for a period sufficient to test the effectiveness of the new technique, G. H. was the only one to develop a recurrence; he was also the only one to get out of bed before the prescribed three weeks. To the surgeons of the time, it was Q.E.D.: Get out of bed too early and your stitches will not hold.

Young G. H. was one of the astonishingly high number of patients who don't follow doctors' orders. In Halsted's time, their sin was called "insubordination"; fifty years later, it was "recalcitrance"; today the preferred term is "noncompliance" or, if one is striving to avoid any connotation of medical paternalism, "nonadherence." No one is sure just how many noncompliant patients there are, but in the studies of prescribed medications that serve as a rough index of such things, the figure averages 50 percent; in one survey, of cases in which children depended on a parent to administer oral penicillin, the rate was 92 percent. At least one-third of hospital admissions for heart failure are necessitated by neglect of dietary or pharmacologic instructions. Many of these patients are elderly, and their noncompliance is caused by such factors as forgetfulness, confusion, cost, intolerance of minor side effects, lack of a social support system, and, finally, complacency after having been relieved of their symptoms by the very therapy that they therefore abandon.

Not all patients end up in the kind of jam in which G. H. found himself. The reasons why some (though not many) get away with medical self-neglect are uncertain, but one of them is surely that in some cases the treatment was not necessary in the first place. We physicians have been taught to categorize our patients and deal with their illnesses by following the algorithm that certain findings should necessarily lead to certain treatments. In the vast majority of cases this approach is appropriate and effective, but sometimes it is found wanting because we have not considered individual variations. The same disease may have different manifestations in different ways in different patients, and therapy should be modified accordingly.

And even a non-complier's relapse or therapeutic unresponsiveness cannot necessarily be ascribed to his failure to follow instructions; there may be other reasons for the poor result. G. H., in fact, is the perfect example. With today's knowledge of wound healing, we can be sure that he could not have done himself harm by getting out of bed and swallowing a few cathartic pills eight full days after a technically adequate hernia repair. In his case,

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"subsequent" does not equal "consequent." The fact is that Halsted's new technique was not perfect. It is also quite possible that the surgeon (who was later disclosed to be secretly addicted first to cocaine and then to morphine) was not in good form on the day of operation. The recurrence of hernia had nothing to do with G. H.'s felony. Halsted's new method was a significant improvement over previous ones, but it was hardly sure-fire. In his early cases, there were seven recurrences among the 53 compliant patients who had been studied long enough, a relapse rate of approximately 13% even when all instructions were obeyed. Of course, none of this contradicts the obvious fact that for almost everyone, the best way to overcome disease or disability is to find a good doctor and do what he or she says. Today's recurrence rate for first-time hernia repair in compliant patients is under 3%.

All this is a way of leading my column back to the First Aphorism of Hippocrates. Readers with elephantine memories will recall that the second installment of "The Uncertain Art" was devoted to a parsing of the first sentence of that ancient maxim. They may also recollect that I promised (or threatened) to get back to the second sentence at a later time. More than four years have passed, and that time is upon us. Here is the entire aphorism, circa 300 B.C., translated from its Greek original:

> Life is short, and the Art is long; the occasion fleeting; experience fallacious, and judgment difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and the externals, cooperate.

The crucial element in the patient's cooperation would seem to be compliance, about which there are some hard-to-erase myths. One is that socioeconomically advantaged people are unlikely to stray from a prescribed therapeutic plan. In fact, one study after another has shown the opposite to be true: nonadherence is so widespread among all social, ethnic, and otherwise categorizable groups that it cannot be predicted based on the characteristics of patients. Inattention to such findings can result in some dangerous misjudgments, not only in the management of individuals but in the equitable treatment of entire populations. For example, some clinicians have considered it appropriate to withhold HIV triple-drug therapy from patients with serious personal or social problems, on the assumption that they are likely to abandon treatment and thereby become a reservoir of drug-resistant strains. Not only is this a violation of patients' rights, but it aborts the possibility of invoking any strategy for enhancing the reliability of the infected individuals. Compliance is improved by involving patients in the design of individualized treatment plans that suit their distinctive circumstances, and by providing support and even incentives when enthusiasm flags. It does not help to stigmatize either the individuals who have lapsed or the groups who have been deemed least trustworthy. Treating non-compliant people as though they are guilty of aberrant behavior not only reveals ignorance of the problem's high frequency across the board, but alienates those who most need encouragement. Avoiding such criticism falls under the Hippocratic aphorism's admonition that the doctor must be "prepared to do what is right himself," a goal he can accomplish only by making the patient a partner in his own management.

But the patient's cooperation is not limited to compliance, nor is it even limited to situations in which disease has already appeared. We know a great deal nowadays about the behaviors that are likely to maintain good health, prevent specific diseases, decrease the probability of injury, and slow down the inevitable wear and tear of the aging process. Almost all of us are aware that we should avoid unhealthful foods and add healthful ones to our diets; get plenty of exercise; practice safe sex; stay away from certain drugs; refrain from smoking; stay out of direct sun as much as possible; be temperate with alcohol; check our bodies for lumps, bumps, sores, changing moles, and unusual or altered secretions;

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maintain a normal weight; wear seat belts and bicycle helmets; and observe certain precautions when traveling to foreign countries. Contrary to the Hippocratic injunction, a doctor cannot be expected to "make" us cooperate in these matters. When we follow the well-known guidelines, we say that we are taking responsibility for our own health.

But does this mean that a chronic sunbather, a couch potato, or a fatty is irresponsible? Despite the temptation, answering yes is tantamount to making a moral judgment. Is it fair to blame the patient for acquiring certain diseases, as so many of the self-righteous have recently taken to doing? Considering the costs and social consequences of poor health, am I a bad citizen if I reach for a second helping of dessert or let my gym membership lapse? The fact is that many of us are critical of the obese and get angry if someone smokes in our vicinity, an anger not really justified by the danger that such a minimal single exposure poses to our own health. Our criticism and anger are likely to be intermingled with a touch of contempt, as though we slender abstainers were somehow better than the rule breakers. When they get sick, we say they have "brought it on themselves," and we wonder, sometimes aloud and even with the intent of influencing policy, why we should be paying their bills with our insurance premiums and taxes. This could not have been what the followers of Hippocrates had in mind. The reward for taking good care of oneself is the probability of improved health, not the attainment of moral superiority.

Anyway, how far should personal responsibility go? The media nowadays exhort us to identify the hospitals with the best record of treating the disease for which we are seeking care; check the credentials of our physicians and ask them about their level of experience; become familiar with the various sources of health information on the Internet; prepare a list of questions when we visit a doctor and make notes of the answers; and, if hospitalized, learn all the precautions that must be followed to minimize the many "nosocomial errors" (hospital-acquired health problems) so frequently reported on the evening news. The medical institution whose patient divisions, laboratories, and operating rooms I have prowled for half a century now provides a brochure titled "Patient Safety: Staying Safe in the Hospital," whose aim is to help patients protect themselves against what the introductory paragraph calls "unfortunate occurrences." "Do not," it admonishes, be "afraid to challenge and be assertive." Woe to the patient so weakened or distracted by his illness that he cannot follow such essential instructions, or too confused to ask for the hospital fact sheet called "How to Avoid Medication Errors." Perhaps not making the most of such opportunities should now fall into the category of "noncompliance." But the expectation of this degree of cooperation couldn't have been predicted by Hippocrates himself, or even by the supernatural forethought ascribed to Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine.

The awesome responsibilities that have recently dropped onto the weary shoulders of patients—and even onto the stalwart shoulders of those who try hard to remain well—have collectively been called "the tyranny of health." We are beset on all sides by rules we must follow lest dire consequences ensue. One form of such tyranny is manifest in the vaunted notion of autonomy, the darling of bioethicists and the source of so much conflict in the minds of physicians whose only motivation is to do the best they can for the men and women who look to them for help. There is such a thing as too much insistence on self-determination when health fails; it can indeed become a tyranny of unrealistic expectations for both the sick and the well. Though no one should doubt that the day of paternalistic medicine is long past, good sense should prevail if the very best and most humane of medical care is to be made available to every patient.

The essence of the Western medical tradition is, in the words of the ancient Hippocratic text *Precepts*, "love of mankind." Love of mankind, and of one another—by doctors, patients, and families—enables the mutual trust that leads to a partnership of shared responsibility and optimal decision making. This kind of love, it seems to me, prevents the

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tyranny not only of health but of paternalism and unbidden autonomy as well. And it does not put pressure or lay blame on the enervated sick, on the disadvantaged, or on those who, for whatever reason, are without the resources to "take charge" of their own health.

Of all the resounding nouns in the First Aphorism—*Life, Art, occasion, experience, judgment, physician, patient, attendants, externals*—the one whose applicability to the doctor is most controversial must surely be *externals.* In Hippocratic times, externals referred to the patient's surroundings: the general ambience most likely to encourage cure. A salubrious climate, good water, healthful and restorative food, an atmosphere of serenity—these were essential ingredients of the way of life that the Greeks called regimen. There was no disagreement about the physician's role in prescribing them. But in the late nineteenth century, medical reformers began to point out that disease is frequently, if not always, the result of social conditions. This meant that doctors should not only become involved in matters of public health—such as water purification, safe housing, sewage disposal, immunizations, and the advocacy of personal cleanliness—but also work to advance social equality and relieve the conditions of the poor. And thus began a vigorous debate about the boundaries of medical responsibility, one that rages to the present day and will no doubt always rage. That society values the intervention of the profession in some of these matters is beyond doubt—one need only recall that the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to an organization called International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

But not all doctors, and certainly not all members of the general public, agree that white-coated influence is appropriate in such matters, and some argue strenuously against it. True, the followers of Hippocrates were committed to "make the externals cooperate," but of what should the externals consist today? What are their limits? How far should medicine—and under its urging, society—go in imposing strictures on self-determination in the name of "taking charge of our own health?" It is one thing to legislate the listing of nutritional factors on food packages, but another to impose a fiat banning junk-food machines from schools; it is one thing to demand that fast-food chains publish the caloric contents of their offerings, but another to legislate the fat content of their hamburgers; it is one thing to print the Surgeon General's warning on a pack of cigarettes, but another to deprive someone of his right to light up in a public place; it is one thing to discourage smoking by taxing cigarettes out of proportion to their value, but another to make the taxes so onerously high that many individuals are deprived of their free choice to indulge. In other words, it is one thing to oversee public and personal health in a free society, but another to deprive people of the freedom to make their own decisions. As a physician committed to all the seemingly harsh dictates I have just listed, I nevertheless worry about the coercion that comes with such well-intended regulatory actions. It is a worry that has existed since the founding of our republic: how to balance the public welfare against the rights of the individual.

It is clear that the second sentence of the famed First Aphorism is far more problematic than the first. Whether the problem is the conundrum of autonomy or the question of how best to interpret the meaning of the word *cooperate,* we physicians seem to waver in our conception of both authority and its limits. Here, as in so many other aspects of our calling, we practice the uncertain art.

Perhaps it is appropriate in this context to stop for a moment and consider the derivation of the word *physician,* coming as it does from the Greek *physis,* meaning "nature": the essence of health was considered to be harmony with nature. But *nature* has another connotation. In preventing and treating illness, our constant companions and often our antagonists are human nature and the nature of personal liberty. As physicians, we ignore them to our peril, the peril of those we would help, and the peril of a free society.

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JOURNAL

Police Log, Lake Oswego, Oregon

BRIAN DOYLE

Our town newspaper's police report is comedy, tragedy, sociology, poetry. It is my town, my species, me. My summaries of some of the incidents it recounted this past year:

SUMMER

Naked man reported driving a copper-colored pickup truck on State Street, heading north. Naked man seen running along the river path. Naked man seen by the old foundry near the lake. Naked man seen in old pioneer cemetery (wearing sunglasses). Naked man seen working on his car on Meadowgrass Street. All reports describe the men or man as white; one specifies a tattoo.

Charred Barbie doll found in chalk circle on State Street.

Seafood delivery truck smashes into light pole. Shrimp all over road.

Woman reports that someone broke into her house, used the hot tub, ate food, drank soda, used the boat, used the beds, used the towels, drank two cases of beer, and left behind the beer cans, some underwear, and three compact discs.

A mailbox shaped like a largemouth bass was stolen on Sarah Hill Lane.

Man reports finding an empty cash register on his lawn in the morning.

Man, age 22, seen clapping, barking, and making karate moves on Fifth Street. Officers contacted the man, who was practicing yoga while walking his dog.

Deceased duck reported on Tenth Street. A second duck reported trying to get to the first duck. Both ducks transported to the local animal clinic.

Man at the bank on State Street reports that a woman in a red jacket asked him if he thought money was important. Police search the area but cannot locate the woman.

Resident on Washington Court reports his house being pelted with golf balls from party across the street.

Woman "spent twenty minutes talking dirty on the telephone before she realized the caller was not her boyfriend." She contacted police to report the incident.

Woman on Fernwood Drive reports a man changing his pants in his car in her driveway. Man became "mouthy" when asked to leave.

Woman, age 19, reports that her father, age 48, "freaked out" and bit her arm.

Man, age 41, reports that his mother has taken his car keys and refuses to give them back.

Complaint on Woodhurst Place: grass on neighbor's lawn too tall. Responding officer measures grass at 36 inches.

Police pull a man over on Boones Ferry Road and find these things in his car: three stereos, a black bag, screwdrivers, flashlights, seven sets

Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland. His book *Saints Passionate & Peculiar* will be published this fall by Saint Mary's Press. His essay "The Soul of Plutarchos" was the co-winner of the 2000 American Scholar Best Essay Award.

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of car stereo mounting brackets, an unidentified crystalline substance, and assorted drug paraphernalia. Suspect asked for receipts but cannot produce them immediately.

Woman arrested at 3:00 A.M. after new black Jaguar weaves all over the road. She fails breath test, car is impounded, woman driven home. Next day, when she appears at police station to claim car, she becomes so upset that she steals the bell off the counter and is charged with third-degree theft.

Woman described as "irate and heavyset" reported throwing ice cream at men at Baskin-Robbins store.

Three people cited for counterfeiting handicapped parking permits.

Woman calls police to complain that her ex-husband has signed up for the same dance class she wants to take.

Man, age 39, arrested for forgery after trying to cash a check. Teller calls police. Man flees in his car (a red Pontiac Grand Am) and then, when halted by a passing freight train, on foot. The police dog chasing suspect gets hung up on the passing train and is carried several blocks by it before freeing himself, rejoining chase, and biting man ("heartily") on the arm.

Guitars stolen from both Our Lady of the Lake Church and United Church of Christ this week.

Complaint: Man selling "haunches" of meat from a truck at the movie theater.

AUTUMN

Complaint: man in small white car seen taping pornographic photographs to the door of a house on Falstaff Road.

On Halloween night, a woman in a witch mask attempts to rob the pub. Bartender refuses her demands for money, and she is last seen headed north. On same night, one man reports fifty children hiding in his bushes.

Kitchen sink found in the middle of Rainbow Drive.

Man found trying to bake cookies on the corner of Foothills Road and State Street. Police arrest him at 7:03 p.m.

Man dressed as a clown and driving a Volvo reported harassing students at Oak Creek School.

Squirrel attacks golfer at ninth hole on Wednesday on the public course. Staff at the course reports seeing the squirrel "acting strange" again on Thursday. "An officer was sent to the scene to investigate, but made no arrests," notes the paper. On each of the same two days the newspaper's receptionist is attacked by a crow while walking on Parkview Drive. She is "startled" when the bird swoops out of the sky and pecks the back of her head. Incident referred to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Two men, both owners of white 1998 Chevy Malibus, inadvertently switch cars on Monday afternoon. The men had identical hiding spots for their car keys and were both parked in the Safeway grocery store lot. One noticed an umbrella that wasn't his in the car, but figured it was his son's.

Police receive call from a woman who believes she may have been the victim of a scam. Three weeks after losing her cat, she received a telephone call from a stranger in California. The caller claimed to be caring for the cat, but needed $600 to cover expenses. The local woman wired the money to the stranger, "but now believes she may have been taken advantage of."

Boy, age four, returned to mother after she drove away from Starbucks and left him there.

Boy, age four, returned to parents after boarding bus alone. Boy tells officers his parents

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were "fighting and screaming" and he was so scared that he wanted to go far away. Parents did not notice boy gone for more than an hour after his estimated departure.

Woman reports that someone has stolen her bank card and is making deposits to her account.

Among the things stolen in recent weeks: a Cadillac emblem, used tires, eight dollars, four bags of recycled newspapers, choir bells from the Christ Episcopal Church, an American flag, four tickets to an Elton John concert, a vacuum cleaner, a portable picnic table, three Santa Clauses (various sizes), two cases of Budweiser beer, two cases of Corona beer, a six-foot snowman, two newspapers ("by a man in a sportscar"), a bottle of vodka ("by a woman in a sportscar"), two bottles of vodka ("by four people in large coats"), a saxophone, a candy machine, the top half of a bikini, an air compressor, a blender, a Gore/Lieberman campaign sign, a ceramic duck wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, a mandarin orange, four dollars, half a cord of wood, half a bottle of Demerol, a Beretta pistol, a birdfeeder, a box of chocolates, twelve tons of newspapers (from the Lions Club), forty candy bars, a bottle of Remy Martin Louis XIII Grande Champagne Cognac (worth $1,400), twenty football helmets, two fishing poles, a piggy bank, two avocados, a Yorkshire terrier, a hearing aid, and two boxes of detergent.

Woman reports that her ex-husband is throwing rocks at her house. Same week: man on Evergreen Road reports his ex-girlfriend is throwing rocks through his window.

Drug-smuggling drag queen seen in town: black male wearing pink wig, purple miniskirt, pink fishnet stockings, and pink rubber boots. Was seen driving a blue Volkswagen bug and was allegedly smuggling a "quantity" of methamphetamine in his wig. No arrest made.

Vandals strike sign at the United Methodist Church on Saturday night, leaving sign for Sunday churchgoers: UNITED METH CHURCH.

White parrot found confused on Hoodview Lane.

Owner of Land Rover on Sixth Street reports walnuts thrown at his car.

Woman on Laurel Street reports that her neighbor has stolen nine pairs of her shoes and left a pile of honey and flour by her car.

Coyote ("fearless") reported on Sandpiper Street.

Man on Park Avenue reports the letters "BE" written in barbecue sauce on his driveway. Woman on Botticelli Street reports the phrase "the end is near" written in wax on her driveway.

WINTER

Man seen near junior high school wearing a large sandwich board on which he has printed TRUST JESUS OR GO TO HELL.

Resident on Seventh Street reports his BMW stolen. After talking with police he remembers that he parked it on Fifth Street.

Man arrested for accepting checks for $9,871 (to install a septic tank) and $15,000 (to clear a mobile-home site) and in both cases refusing to perform any work.

Complaint: oranges thrown at passersby from a window on Mount Jefferson Terrace.

Complaint: patron at library throwing coins at staff members.

Complaint: horses running down middle of Goodall Road.

Complaint: two wolves seen at the bus stop on South Shore Road. Police suspect coyotes.

Woman on White Oaks Drive receives a photograph in the mail: her stolen snowman, with a machete in its throat and a knife in its eye. Police believe neighborhood children to be responsible.

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Police issue a warning to three juveniles to stop posing plastic reindeer in mating positions.

Woman, age 46, agrees to be committed after cutting into the walls of her home looking for listening devices.

Woman, age 78, twice reports her children locked in her car's trunk; police find that her children live out of state.

Woman reports that she is no longer hearing the voices her husband and family had programmed her to hear.

Man, age 76, is found shivering on the ground near the river. He has no shoes and one glass eye.

Runaway teenager from the school for retarded children is found in his hometown, 100 miles away; he tells police he is trying to visit his mother.

Customer at Palisades Market reports being fired upon by a man with a bow and arrow. Arrow found stuck in plastic trim of the market's front door.

Teenage boy seen vomiting on State Street. Police determine that the boy and a friend were engaged in a milk-drinking contest.

Complaint: drunken teenage party. Police responding to the scene find "an alcohol-free multicultural potluck."

Man, age 22, reported arguing with clerks at 7-Eleven store. He tells police that his behavior was part of a Native American ritual.

Front porch on Sierra Court meticulously covered with layer of marshmallow.

Woman reports being abducted by "church people."

Man, age 33, arrested for stealing a money order from a house, stealing beer from the grocery store, assaulting a man at the bus stop, and running away from police through downtown business district. Man apprehended in a law office, where he asks the receptionist for a business card before being taken to police station.

Pushy Jehovah's Witnesses reported on Preakness Court.

Large golden retriever steals sandwich from a police officer on Monroe Parkway. Dog is last seen headed north.

Resident of Hotspur Drive reports strong sulphur odor when toilet flushes. When she flushes same toilet a second time, the odor is gone.

Complaint: "An ugly person with the worst hair ever seen" going door to door on Lake Haven Drive.

SPRING

A man living on Scarborough Drive reports a message on his answering machine from a caller who threatened to defecate on his lawn if he was not paid $100 million. Police determine that the caller was drunk.

Dead dog reported on Country Club Road turns out to be packing materials.

Tennis ball on Reece Road determined to be a tennis ball and not a bomb.

Doors of high school reported glued shut. Outhouse found on roof of school. Police suspect student prank.

Escaped ducks and chickens returned to owner. One duck missing. Owner warned about town ordinance regarding livestock at large.

Man found shooting at peacocks at Waluga Park. Peacocks uninjured.

Man reports lock changed at house. Police report to scene and discover that the man wasn't wearing his glasses and had been trying to open the door with his key upside down.

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Two people reported "engaged in a sex act atop a black Jeep Cherokee at the elementary school." Police arrive at scene but find no one.

"Strange man" reported at El Ranchito Mexican restaurant. Another strange man reported at Starbucks on State Street, conversing with people and buying them cookies. He has a mustache.

Man, age 33, calls police from hotel to report that his mother has sent a poisonous snake to his room to kill him. Officer arrives and finds man with cocaine and a woman not his wife. Man says he called the police by accident.

The word "insane" found scratched in the window of the art gallery.

Newspaper runs erratum note: the bomb reported at the elementary school last week was actually a bong ("a water pipe commonly used for smoking marijuana," the paper explains helpfully).

Resident of Megan Place reports her purse stolen from her home. Police find the purse where she left it, under the kitchen sink.

Complaint: Manager of an apartment complex reports child going door to door in the complex asking residents "What's up?" Police do not locate the child.

Woman reports strange sounds coming from a nearby vehicle. Officers, suspecting an animal trapped inside, discover that the "suspicious braying and whining" is a country music compact disc.

Mailbox blown up on Andrews Road.

Woman reports kids jumping on her trampoline.

Squirrel reported "intoxicated" on Cornell Street.

Older kids reported yelling at younger kids at Southwood Park.

Woman reports bottle of prescription medicine on her lawn. Police will attempt to return the Viagra pills to their rightful owner.

I finally pop into the office of the Lake Oswego Review *to find out who writes the police log. Turns out to be a young man named Scott Hammers: Alaskan native, news reporter for three years, previous job selling electric scooters. Gets some 150 police reports a week by fax. A complaint by phone is received by a dispatcher who records time, gets address, dispatches officer or officers, records resolution of complaint, faxes day's report to chief, archives, and newspaper. Hammers looks for serious crime first, drama second, color third. Doesn't publish names of children under eighteen. Tries to end column with a bang each week.*

Hammer told me, "The log gives you a wonderful sense of the flavor of the town. It's easy and fun to write. Most of the time I just leave the dispatcher's language, which can be hilariously deadpan. Sometimes the items are sad. Most of them are boring—mail theft, people complaining about dogs, car accidents, car break-ins. But some are off-the-charts interesting."

His all-time favorite? A duct-tape-wrapped bomb on the high school tennis courts, which turned out to be, after the police bomb squad exploded it, a pile of Penthouse *magazines, scraps of which floated down all over town.*

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· B O O K S ·

REREADING

Sgt. Pepper's Words

DAVID MICHAELIS

In June of 1967, when I was nine, my brother and I were farmed out to summer camp in Vermont. In those days you went off with a fully packed trunk and spent more or less the whole summer far from home. You were not allowed to bring anything that connected you with civilization, not even a transistor radio to follow the baseball season. But late one morning in July, I heard by chance the opening bars of a record that had somehow arrived in camp from civilization's very epicenter. I had been on my contented way from archery, in the upper field, to woodworking, in the barn—a day that could just as easily have been taking place in 1947, because none of the traditional forms of a boy's camp life had yet changed, as everything about the way we thought and dressed and did things was to change after 1967—when from the barn's shuttered hayloft the electric sound of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* bolted through the clean, sunny air.

The counselors' lounge was seedy and inaccessible, an outpost of adult mysteries. The physical presence of the new Beatles album up there behind closed doors created a charged atmosphere I will never forget. I was almost sick with the sheer nerve of it. I remember feeling pierced by the words—*It was twenty years ago today*—and in that first instant of listening in, the shock of the new Beatles record combined with the prestige of the counselors' lounge to produce an alternate reality.

Archery? Woodworking? I couldn't have cared less. Of course I couldn't give them up, either. I loved archery, I wanted to impress my parents with a Bowman's Medal, and as that summer went on—the Summer of Love, it turned out—I felt the clear, straight lines of my boyhood becoming blurred in a way I did not fully understand.

I knew a little about the Beatles already. I owned two Beatles records (*A Hard Day's Night* and *Beatles '65*), and when I was six and my brother seven, we had owned Beatles wigs. They were oddly shaped, scruffy thatches of synthetic black hair. They fit over our heads like ladies' bathing caps and didn't look anything like the real thing. We didn't mind—these were *Beatles* wigs, and there was something deliciously insubordinate about wearing them. Years later, when I studied a passage of Milton that described Adam and Eve's childlike rebellion in Eden, I had a pang of giddy joy that reminded me of the liberation I had felt each time I pushed my scalp through the wig's hairy opening.

This new album was different, more complicated. It was no longer just a release of youthful energy; there was an elegiac tone in both the words and the music, and that was what made me feel I was entitled to their hidden truths. The previous summer, my parents had sat my brother and me down for an important talk. I knew before the word *separation* knifed into our living room that it really meant divorce. *Nothing will change,* they said.

David Michaelis, the author of *N. C. Wyeth: A Biography,* is currently working on a biography of Charles Schulz. He contributed "Provincetown Journal" to the SCHOLAR's Summer 2000 issue.

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We both love you very much. It was my mother who for years afterward would say, *We're still a family.*

The message of *Sgt. Pepper* was that things were not as they appeared, which made me, I felt intuitively, the perfect student of its puzzles. Every day, it seemed, additional information about *Sgt. Pepper* came into circulation: a 20,000-Hz tone, audible only to dogs, had been recorded backward into the inner groove at the end of the album's British version. It was said that dogs all over England were going bananas when tone arms on hi-fi sets failed to pick up automatically and instead drifted into the subversive inner groove of *Sgt. Pepper.* Every night, it seemed, the two counselors in my cabin discussed the album, quietly debating shades of meaning we didn't understand; I recall one of them telling the other that the reverberating piano chord at the end of the record (E major, held for forty-two seconds) gave him cold chills because it was *supposed* to make you think of a nuclear explosion.

It almost didn't matter that we weren't allowed to listen to the album, let alone hear the chiller chord that ended "A Day in the Life" or the 20,000-Hz dog alarm. The mystification that surrounded the album had as much to do with the art on the cover as it did with the record itself. Marijuana plants, for example, could be clearly seen in the photographic tableau on the *Sgt. Pepper* cover—*real pot plants,* daringly placed in plain sight at the Beatles' feet, or so the counselors said.

One night they brought the cover around for inspection. We each had a turn with it. The infamous tableau was as densely woven as a tapestry; it was hard to know where to look. Under the big blue Northern England sky, tiers of cutout faces, cloth figures, waxworks, ferns, potted palms, garden ornaments, and sculptural busts were arrayed around the flesh-and-blood Beatles, who, tiger-bright in military-band regalia and holding brass and wind instruments instead of electric guitars, stood poker-faced behind a circusy Lonely Hearts Club Band drum skin. We tried to name faces in the crowd behind the band. Somebody pointed out Sonny Liston. There, too, was Marlon Brando from *The Wild One,* a popular poster image on the bedroom walls of older brothers in my neighborhood. I recognized the early Beatles as Madame Tussaud's wax figures, and I knew Bob Dylan—he was a folk singer. All else was unknown to me. I recall turning over the cover. There, vibrating in black print on a Chinese-red background, were the words.

It's hard to remember now what this meant then. To paraphrase Kenneth Tynan's remark about how *Citizen Kane* changed filmmaking, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* revolutionized pop music as the airplane revolutionized warfare. Until *Sgt. Pepper,* the pop single had dominated the recording industry, each 45-rpm record comprising two songs, the hit tune on side A, a lesser song on side B. Pop singles were marketed in a plain sleeve with no sign that the lyrics were to be treated as anything more than bubble gum, chewed once and tossed away.

From *Introducing the Beatles* in 1963 to *Revolver* in 1966, the Beatles had supplemented the traditional release of new hit singles with annual appearances of two-sided LPs, the covers of which, though increasingly brash and inventive, gave no warning of what *Sgt. Pepper* would unleash. Inside and out, everything about the new record was narrative. It was bursting to tell a story. The Beatles made their regular instruments, from bass guitar to drums, sound like voices that had something fresh to say, while making the harpsichord and the fiddle, as well as classical instruments from India, seem integral to the most far-out aspirations of rock 'n' roll. It was the first rock album to insert orchestral scoring for narrative effects—one of many ways in which *Sgt. Pepper* was created more in the manner of filmmaking than by the conventions of the music industry. And if the recording processes devised in the Abbey Road studios gave *Sgt. Pepper* the aura of a mod film, the sumptuous packaging that the Beatles insisted upon clothed the album in its most characteristic quality: readability. Here was the first record ever to publish its lyrics on the back of its cover. The songs told a story that was con-

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nected by a theme and that could be read cover to cover.

After that first eager glimpse in camp, I bought the record, with my mother, at Sam Goody's, on a visit to Manhattan. Back in our living room, at the exact middle of the sofa, where my mother's gay designer friend sat each of us in turn to demonstrate the brand-new effects of stereo (a scientific moment that my father would previously have husbanded us through), I settled into a habit of sitting cross-legged and alone, ostentatiously studying *Sgt. Pepper*'s words without playing the stereo at all. It was a deliberate act to *read* the Beatles without the music. Using eye instead of ear to ransack the lyrics for their hidden adult meanings turned even a ten-year-old into a seeker of ambiguity, an investigator of the imagination, a devotee of poetry. I had no musical ability then or now, and being given the words on a Chinese-red platter was like being rewarded in school with a period of free play. The literariness of Lennon and McCartney was just my speed. Looking-glass ties? Cellophane flowers that tower over your head? A hole that needs fixing? Where had I heard this before? Of course: Alice on the riverbank, Alice down the Rabbit-Hole, Alice in the Garden of Live Flowers.

Sgt. Pepper seemed to be nothing less than an *Alice in Wonderland* for the brave new psychedelic world. Everything in Pepperland was reversed, just as in Lewis Carroll's mirror-crazy Wonderland. The Lonely Hearts Club Band was "in style" one moment, "out of style" the next. In "Getting Better," things got better because they could get no worse. In "Fixing a Hole," it really didn't matter "if I'm wrong / I'm right." Life in Pepperland flowed two ways at once: "within you and without you."

Curiouser and curiouser! The most forward-looking recording in the history of rock music began by looking back to a day twenty years in the past. Recorded tracks, when reversed and played back, had new and sometimes sexual meanings. The cover image was full of reversals: old heroes were young again; celebrities were "lonely hearts"; the most popular rock group in the world had become a small-time brass band. Look in the tableau's foreground, where the hottest name in 1960s show business—BEATLES—was spelled out in a deliberately parochial form of display: municipal flower-bed lettering.

My true experience of *Sgt. Pepper* was as a reader. The wordplay was no more complicated than that which I had adored in Edward Lear's nonsense verse or in O. Henry's grifter stories, which I was reading in sixth-grade English. M. C. Escher, whose magic realism I encountered in math class, thanks to a brilliant and iconoclastic teacher, also showed that things were not as they seemed. The Beatles were asking the same question: *What's wrong with this picture?* Over and over, I read the album, trying to decode the tapestry on the front and the strange, spangled words on the back.

The Beatles had written songs that set out to be *not* understandable. *Sgt. Pepper* was a world in which, instead of receiving clear-cut statements, you projected your own dream onto a cloud. It was like Zen: the song *was* the question. You had to go through a process of self-emptying before you could absorb the answer. But the album's organizing principle, its thought-out-edness, took you . . . where? Back to itself. The Beatles coded their imagery, as all Romantic poets had, so that the younger generation, once it thought it had answered the riddle, could feel safe in its knowingness. *Sgt. Pepper* belonged to a genre evergreen to adolescents: If you get it right, you will understand it, but the deeper truth is always one more magnification beyond where your non-dreaming mind can see.

As a boy, I thought the Beatles were the suave, avant-garde leaders of the culture. Whatever they wore in the early 1960s—Chelsea boots, mop haircuts, collarless jackets—everyone wore. By 1967, trapped by worldwide fame, they weren't so much leaders of the culture as hostages to its hot center. *Sgt. Pepper* shows them to be the spokesmen for a cultural period that now seems nearly as quaint and faraway as Dickens's London. The Beatles didn't invent the New, as I thought; they invented an attitude through which to picture the New and the Old simultaneously. The costumes they chose for their *Sgt. Pepper* alter egos were takeoffs not just on the British

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imperial past but on the swinging London of 1967, when kids flocked to Carnaby Street and the King's Road to buy recycled police capes and brass-buttoned military coats at boutiques with names like I Was Lord Kitchener's Valet, which was also the title of a pop song by the New Vaudeville Band ("Winchester Cathedral" was their big single). Its chorus went:

> Oh Lord Kitchener, what a to-do,
> Everyone is wearing clothes that once belonged to you.
> If you were alive today I'm sure you would explode,
> If you took a stroll down the Portobello Road.

Rereading *Sgt. Pepper* thirty-five years later, I sat down in my office in Washington, D.C., with the scuffed album from Sam Goody's—it's been marooned for years with the rest of my records in a summer house that still has a record player. In my office, the only way to listen to music is on a compact disc inserted into the Microsoft Windows Media Player. Although I've updated most of the music of my youth with CDs, *Sgt. Pepper* is one of the albums that looks so ridiculous in the miniature form (*Woodstock* is another: more than six square feet of visual material shrunk to $4\ ^{3/4}$ by $5\ ^{1/2}$ inches of plastic casing sealed by the most infuriating packaging ever invented), that I haven't had the stomach to replace the original.

I scanned the back of the record cover, where five newspaper-column-size lines of black type still pulled me right in with the opener: "It was twenty years ago today, / Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play." I wanted to fall right back into the audience—to "sit back and let the evening go." But the lines were hard to read, and not just because the record inside the cover had rubbed a white circle onto the printed surface, erasing entire words. The lyrics are in my memory anyway. I didn't need to see them in print because they alighted automatically, almost too quickly, on my inner ear. It was as if I had written them myself, and therefore could no longer lay claim to what happens only once during the initial excitement of creation: an awakening to life itself. Coming from within, predigested and reconstituted, instead of fresh and new from without, the words had calcified.

What rereading without music did allow me to see, however, was how concrete a place Pepperland actually is, and how much the Beatles needed for their cloudlandish, countercultural effects the solid institutions, traditions, and even architecture of the receding Empire —"all that Trafalgar Square stuff," as John Osborne, England's brash young playwright of the 1950s, referred to the country's crippling nostalgia. Hallowed British scenes and settings in "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds"—"a boat on a river," "a bridge by a fountain," "a train in a station"—are blown apart and repatterned by "tangerine trees," "rocking horse people," "plasticine porters," a "girl with kaleidoscope eyes." Every bit of color-saturated 1967 psychedelia comes alive because of the contrast with images of drab, gray, postwar England.

At John Lennon's direction, the record's brilliant producer, George Martin, created the swirly, Victorian, and very English effects in the sawdust circus world of "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite." Martin found recordings of old-fashioned steam organs, then scissored the tape into fifteen-inch segments, instructing Geoff Emerick, the recording engineer, to toss the lengths of tape into the air, pick them up, and resplice the bits into a new whole. That kind of Dadaist approach, while emblematic of the experiments that made *Sgt. Pepper* a mirror image of its time, could work musically only within the formal structure that Lennon and McCartney and Martin actually felt most comfortable inside. The lyrics of "Mr. Kite" may have sounded far-out to the ear in 1967, but "a splendid time is guaranteed for all" and the rest were sentences transposed verbatim from an 1843 circus poster that John Lennon had bought in an antique shop in Sevenoaks, Kent.

Throughout *Sgt. Pepper,* English place names (Bishopsgate; the Isle of Wight; Blackburn, Lancashire), British institutions (the old school; tea time; the House of Lords; the English army; the Royal Albert Hall), and English types (the grandchildren, Vera, Chuck, and Dave; Mr. Kite; the Hendersons; the man from

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the motor trade; Rita, the meter maid) are presented alternately as extensions of British greatness or as fading rays in the imperial sunset. The album's themes are anchored, more than I realized, in a period when England was looking back—part wistfully, part skeptically—to a world in which, more often than not, the "English Army had just won the war," although the 1967 narrator of "A Day in the Life" can remember the Empire's glory only from seeing it in a movie. The "twenty years ago today" that seems to invite the audience of a brass-band concert to recall an earlier, better time is actually pinpointing 1947 as the date from which the rest of the "show" follows—a year when Great Britain, lately in command of one-quarter of the world's landmass, was coming to terms with its decline. Awash in historical nostalgia for what had been, the English could easily recognize the symbols in John Osborne's bitter play *The Entertainer*, in which a collapsed music-hall player says, "Don't clap too loud, it's a very old building," a reference less to anything architectural than to the weakening of England itself.

The Beatles, grandchildren of Victorians, understood in their twenties that they were witnessing the end not just of English folk arts—such as the music-hall variety show and the brass bands that had played green parks in every stronghold of the Empire—but of something significant about the English character. Their lives had begun during the last crucial test of the British people. The births of Richard Starkey in July 1940 and John Lennon in October 1940 and Paul McCartney in June 1942 and George Harrison in February 1943 coincided with England's darkest but finest hours. Hitler's blitzkrieg, the Nazi seizure of Paris, the fall of France, the collapse of the Chamberlain government, the rise of Churchill, the bombing of England, and the Battle of Britain all took place in the five months before John Winston Lennon's mother and aunt gave him a middle name inspired by Churchillian greatness. Twenty-five years later, in January 1965, Sir Winston's death and state funeral marked the final organizing moment of Britain's decline and the full flowering of Victorian nostalgia.

By 1967, the Beatles, driving force of the New and the Now, stood on the infamous cover of *Sgt. Pepper* like the gatekeepers of history. They had learned from their brief lives as world-renowned celebrities that things were not always as they appeared to be. In *The Beatles Anthology*, the millennial recounting of Beatles history by the Beatles themselves, Paul McCartney notes that "what we were saying about history [was that] all history is a lie, because every fact that gets reported gets distorted." Every kind of falsehood and misinterpretation had by then been reported about the Beatles and their music; untruth had freed them to create their own narrative, choose their own heroes, reinvent history.

Behind them, in a collage meant to illustrate their sense of the precise present moment of 1967, stood their handpicked representatives of the collective cultural past. Into this pantheon, the Beatles elevated a host of American movie stars and comedians, along with gurus and yogis, writers and painters (though not many musicians), Liverpool soccer heroes, and some seemingly conventional British figures whose lives contained surprise twists, such as the writer Aldous Huxley, whose experiments with LSD and mescaline in the early 1950s had led him to coin the word *psychedelic*. Although the fictitious military bandleader Sergeant Pepper appeared only as a handout that came with the album—on a square of cardboard that also included bonus moustaches, badges, sergeant stripes, and other paraphernalia—I was interested to learn that there had been a real-life figure named Pepper: one of the many retired army officers of the British Raj in India who used their military ranks when playing for the local cricket team. Sergeant Pepper played for Uttar Pradesh.

Peering into the cover tableau now, I see, of course, that the famous marijuana plants were nothing but greenery—a spiky houseplant whose Latin name, *Peperomia*, was another inside joke. I look at John, Ringo, Paul, and George, and see them consciously distancing themselves from the viewer. The band is photographed through a filter, with a deep-focus lens, and there's an extreme, almost deathlike stillness on every surface. After the fan-

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tastic energy of their first five years, the Beatles are stepping back into the depths of time. The sense of mourning that fanatical fans sensed in the *Sgt. Pepper* tableau, which they believed contained a set of clues to the unannounced death of Paul McCartney, is, in a more real sense, a eulogy to lost childhood. The four young men on that record have no idea how, or even if, they are going to grow up, and if they do, how they will ever stay together as a band. Standing among the totems of their Liverpudlian Eden, pantomiming the gestures of a dying Empire, the Beatles were taking a first step out of their dizzyingly successful unadult lives and looking back to the solid England of Lennon and McCartney's boyhood dreaming.

I had a similar feeling of deliberate distance in a bookstore the other day, when I noticed that Paul McCartney had printed some of the *Sgt. Pepper* lyrics (among others from the Beatles songbook) in a spotlessly dust-jacketed volume of poetry—as if, in other words, they weren't songs and really *had* been poetry all along. I picked up the tidy white book and tried to read the familiar words in the state of aural blankness it demanded. But some right-brain part of me kept letting in the music. Great big wind-blown gusts of studio instrumentation blew into Sir Paul's spotless white Parnassian tent, ruining his sherry party. It was an odd reaction: when I was a boy I read these lyrics on the back of the album as poetry, whereas now, dressed up in white tie and tails, they seemed to have *lost* their poetry. Published formally, *Sgt. Pepper*'s words no longer looked excitingly Now; they looked very Then.

During my preteen and teen years, most records entered my system for a while; I had a favorite song for various moods—an up song, a down song, a daydreaming song, a rebel song—and I memorized them all. After a season or two, those songs would pass out of me, and the record itself would remain a fixed piece of a fixed time in the past, part of my increasingly obsolete vinyl collection, an artifact of a lost age. *Sgt. Pepper*—the name as an abstraction; the image I carry in memory of its cover; even the original object itself, with the outline of the record within visible as a rubbed white circle on the cardboard without—remains in and with me, like a plate connecting halves of a broken bone. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had healing power, and in the summer of 1967, I needed something I couldn't have found in the tourniquet instructions in *The Boy Scout Handbook*. The Bowman's Medal I brought home from camp, which I thought would somehow change everything, seemed as theatrical and obsolete as the medals on the Beatles' military tunics.

After my father left my mother, she always awoke at five in the morning and lay in bed, thinking that he would come to his senses, walk out on the woman for whom he had walked out on her, and return home, to his side of the bed, where he belonged. So far as I know, my father had no intention of ditching my stepmother or her children, with whom he had formed a second family; and when it turned out that my mother wasn't going to choose a permanent replacement for Dad's side of the bed, I began to spend as much time as I could away from my own bed too. I used to daydream myself into other families, and some of them actually took me in and let me live, without pauses, in the kind of extended living and eating plan that the early 1970s seemed to specialize in.

If the melody of "She's Leaving Home" now sounds melodramatic almost to the point of parody, I can still read in the words the strangely disembodied feeling my nine-year-old self tried on when I first encountered the song: Was this how it felt to have no home? To abandon and be abandoned? The story of my house and the household in the song did not match, but since my mother's day always began at five o'clock, the hour of the day's start in the song, and the hour before which I took some of my own exits from Eden, the lament of the refrained farewell—*bye bye*—still squeezes my heart.

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Dreaming of Dunghills

JANE BROX

LARDING THE LEAN EARTH:
SOIL AND SOCIETY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA
by Steven Stoll. Hill and Wang. $30.

In the days after my father's death, as I was organizing the affairs of our farm, where he'd been born eighty-five years before, I came upon the 1924 *Soil Survey of Middlesex County.* This booklet gives the particular, elaborate name and best use of every soil to be found here, and an accompanying map strips every inch of earth of its dun color and assigns it a rich, saturated one. The colors swirl and eddy—they remind me of Italian marbled paper—with fine distinctions and varying promises: the yellows of Hollis and the oranges of Sudbury loams, the pink of the Gloucester gravelly phase. The pale blue of Hinckley gravelly sandy loam: *derived largely from coarse glacial drift . . . [D]rainage, which is almost entirely internal, is usually excessive to the extent that crops suffer in dry seasons.* Merrimac gravelly sandy loam: *Hay yields range from 1 to 1 1/2 tons to the acre on the best farmed land. . . . The soil is easy to cultivate. It is plowed 8 or 9 inches deep and can be brought into good tilth without difficulty.* Coloma sandy loam, gravelly phase: *It can be utilized for pasture land, but it furnishes only indifferent grazing. The rougher areas should be left in forest or should be reforested to white pine.* Clearly the survey had been written for a world where farming was the common life, which it was in 1924, even in Massachusetts, though by then New England agriculture had been in decline for more than a century.

"All you could smell was cows," my father used to say of his childhood world. By the end of his life in the late twentieth century, most of the variously good or indifferent loams that he and his neighbors had farmed—Coloma, Gloucester, Merrimac—had either been paved over or reverted to woods. Ours is one of only a handful of working farms remaining in town. Even so, the idea of agriculture carries strong sentiment, and here, as elsewhere, many people have begun to devote their sober attention to saving the little remaining farmland from development, which requires more than simply setting aside "open space," since agriculture is always a negotiation between the human and wild—grasses grow freely, but hay is always made. More than one town has been willing to pay an exorbitant sum to preserve its last orchard or hayfield, only to find the greater work to be in searching for someone, anyone, willing and able to keep the land in cultivation.

We go to such lengths to preserve the look and feel of farmland in part because we equate squared-off fields rolling into woods and the smell of cut hay on the June breeze with settled order and permanence. But such allegiance is also testimony to the way farming has defined this country since the early days of white settlement. At that time, the remembrance of the European countryside—which by the seventeenth century had been made almost completely into a cultivated landscape by countless generations of peasant toil—contended with the realities of a new world where, hurriedly and anxiously, as a matter of survival, colonists often had to make tillable fields out of wilderness. Available land appeared endless, and consequently, when the old soil became exhausted or erosion carried the topsoil away, most colonists found it far

Jane Brox is the author of *Here and Nowhere Else* and *Five Thousand Days Like This One*. Her new collection of essays will be published in 2004.

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more expedient to girdle and burn trees to clear new acreage than to do the painstaking work of maintaining the fertility of established fields.

Waste is always easy—anyone can accomplish it—whereas the maintenance of farmland requires forethought and diligence, and can be expensive, as Steven Stoll explains in *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America.* Soil, he notes, is an immovable resource:

> Families carried their corn and hogs long distances, but soil was what they found where they set down and sometimes what they confronted. They might take from it or add to it by treating its fertile nutrients as a rotating fund, but they could change its essential characteristics—emerging from moisture, elevations, and the entire biota—only within tight margins.

And, he observes, farmers are not only keepers of the soil but exploiters of it:

> The plow is at once the symbol of domestication and the world's most feared ecological wrecking ball. It unearths micro environments, destroys nests and burrows, throws open moisture. Whether they accept the charge or not, plow-people become the caretakers of soils.

Because of the wasteful agricultural methods of the early settlers, the soils along the eastern seaboard had been largely exhausted by the nineteenth century, and along with the loss of topsoil and soil fertility, the East lost population, vibrancy, and political influence as the West opened up at an astonishing rate. Stoll's fine book brings to light the intricacies of land and country in the maturing republic as it traces the efforts of easterners to establish a culture of settlement and permanence in a country aiming for the frontier. At the heart of this examination are the improvers, a group of agriculturists searching for ways to maintain the fertility of farmland. The improvers most notably espoused a method of convertible husbandry known as the dunghill doctrines, in which the sowing of quality hay gives sustenance to cattle, after which their manure is composted and returned to specific fields as fertilizer. This results not only in marketable goods and sustenance for the farmer but in the sustained fertility of the soil.

This simple, elegant method proved to be of revolutionary importance to agriculture. "[It] did not merely rotate function within the same limited space," Stoll writes.

> It maintained the dynamic balance between production and decomposition that is one of the crucial control points in any ecosystem. The new husbandry eliminated the fallow and made every farm into a manure factory, and under this system the cycling of fertile nutrients became the central ecological function in agriculture.

Although Stoll sees this movement toward soil enhancement and conservation as an essential advance in farming practice, he insists that the improvers would not recognize in their method the environmental ethic we see today; rather, they simply saw the establishment of an enduring agriculture as a means of creating an enduring society.

Stoll, an assistant professor of history at Yale, possesses a comprehensive understanding of practice and idea, and he travels effortlessly between explanations of the fundamentals of soil science, fertility, tillage, and erosion and examinations of the large historical forces of the nineteenth century, guiding the reader through the depression of 1818, the Mexican War, merino mania, the pressures of agriculture in a growing market economy, the introduction of marl and guano into agricultural practice, the ecology of grasses, the digestive system of cows, and the brute work required by a pre-industrial farms.

That brute work became the sticking point of convertible husbandry, as Stoll makes clear when he concentrates his argument on the rich soils of Pennsylvania, specifically the Bucks County farm of James Pemberton Morris, one of the doctrine's promulgators. Morris's stead was prosperous, neat, diverse, com-

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plex. He raised sheep and cattle and grew clover, peaches, rye, timothy, and a host of other crops, but he also had the means to hire men to build his barns, mow his meadows, and plant his corn while he went to market, addressed agricultural meetings, and talked with bankers and agents. Yes, the voices championing improvement were usually those of gentleman farmers who, in their prosperity, had no desire to move, and were thus invested in keeping the population and political influence at home. Those choosing the frontier had far fewer resources, were less established, and suffered more from low yields, high land prices, and downswings in the economy. They lacked available labor: convertible husbandry, even on a small farm, required at the very least the removal of thousands of pounds of dung from the barn every week, and few makeshift farms could find the labor necessary to accomplish such a task on top of all the other chores of the day. As D. H. Lawrence said, "The toiling blood swamps the idea, inevitably."

Additionally, the dunghill doctrines were not equally suited to all parts of the country—soil and societies both have their local particularities—and in the nineteenth century, the southern piedmont region of South Carolina was very particular. Owing to the delicate soil structure and the frequent heavy rains of the area, South Carolina farmland was especially prone to erosion and wore away at an astounding rate even under careful cultivation. The soil also tended to be highly acidic, allowing cotton to flourish but hampering the healthy growth of grasses, which are the foundation of convertible husbandry. The economics of slavery played a part as well, since slaves transported to more fertile ground earned higher returns than those kept in place on played-out soil. When cotton plantation owners of South Carolina faced the struggle for permanence, they did so in their own way, by clearing new tracts of land, terracing, employing crop rotation, and intercropping with cowpeas to transfer nitrogen to the soil. Even so, such practices were never widespread in the South or successful in the long term, and out-migration was inevitable. "What impoverishment, what ruin, what desolation has the spirit of emigration produced in South Carolina?" lamented one Southerner. "Look throughout the State and see their deserted fields and waste habitations! No one considers himself permanently settled. No one expects his children to live where he does, to inhabit the house he does, or to cultivate the soil which he is improving."

Northerners failed to staunch the westward flow of settlers as well: "The good husbandry was good because it triumphed in place and paid its debt to soil, but it failed historically," writes Stoll. "The few decades of its preeminence tell of a fundamental instability not in the dunghill doctrines but in an unsettled people who did not know their borders."

With their ethic of restraint and their understanding of the link between the cultivated and the wild, the improvers served as forerunners of the conservation movement, which found its primary influential voice in George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*, published in 1864. Marsh, says Stoll, "employed a terminology that would influence conservationist thinking throughout the twentieth century. In its vigorous assertion that environments are shaped by societies, in its tactile love of place and process, the book represents the perfection of the dunghill doctrines—their transcendence of political borders." *Man and Nature* also served to move the argument beyond the pages of agricultural journals to a broader arena in the cities and suburbs. The argument would eventually find further promotion in the advocacies of Andrew Jackson Downing, landscape designer and architect, who, with his ideal of clipped lawns, cottage gardens, and orchards, gave a people moving increasingly away from agriculture some semblance of it in their own backyards.

Which brings us to today, and our dream of preserving hayfields and orchards at a time when fewer than three percent of Americans live on farms. Though niche farms selling goat cheese, baby greens, and even grass-fed beef may be on the rise, most people are nourished by industrial agriculture, the products of which are delivered by rail and

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UNDERWORDS

Perspectives on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

EDITED BY JOSEPH DEWEY, STEVEN G. KELLMAN, AND IRVING MALIN

This collection of thirteen essays marks the first in-depth examination of one of the most acclaimed and highly anticipated works of American literature of the last twenty years. Don DeLillo's 1997 masterwork Underworld was immediately recognized as a landmark novel, not only in the long career of one of America's most distinguished novelists but as well in the ongoing evolution of the postmodern novel and in the achievement of fin-de-millennium American literature. Vast in scope, intricately organized, and densely allusive, the text is nothing less than a cultural biography of postwar America, touching as it does on themes as diverse as environmental politics, nuclear apocalypse, the deep influence of film and television, the cultural positioning of sports, the disturbing psychology of contemporary violence, the intricate patternings of language, and the cultural role of the artist. That it does so without sacrificing the traditional elements of narrative—an engrossing plot and nuanced characters—makes the text an extraordinary achievement.

This collection brings together lively readings from both new and established voices in critical and cultural studies. These essays are organized into a pattern of expanding investigation, beginning with a close reading of a single pattern of images within the text, then moving to essays that examine the novel within DeLillo's larger catalog of fiction, and then essays that suggest important parallels not only to works of authors contemporary with DeLillo but ties to canonical works and authors of American literature. Finally, the closing essays audaciously explore the novel's achievement using baseball, the films of Stanley Kubrick, and the tradition of comedy that dates back to Dante. Such diversity only begins to suggest the stunning levels of interpretative possibilities at which this mesmerizing text exists. These essays mark an important first step in engaging the full achievement of this remarkable work.

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ship, highway and plane to the terminal markets in large cities. Mangoes and papayas jostle with New Zealand apples and tomatoes and strawberries pushing the edges of their natural growing seasons. Everything is called "product" by the vendors and comes from farms that depend on a chemical network for soil fertility, because soil management has evolved into an exact science—a farmer can use the Global Positioning System in conjunction with grid soil samples to determine the precise nutrient needs of every square inch of his fields. It is called precision farming, or farming by the inch.

Stoll, though, chooses not to conclude with the industrial model, insisting it is not the inevitable shape of the future; rather, he ends with a visit to David Kline's Amish farm, where the entire family plants, tends, and harvests a wide variety of crops. Not only do the Klines practice convertible husbandry, but raccoons are allowed a share of the corn. The harmony of the Kline farm may be what most of us dream of preserving with our efforts, though as a model for our future it feels fanciful. (I can't forget my father's lifelong contention with raccoons in the corn and with mice girdling the apple trees, never mind insects and fungus—a conflict that was there at the beginning and end of his life, however much the agricultural world had changed around him.) Besides, we are still a people who do not know our borders. But the improvers carried hope with them, so why shouldn't Stoll as well?

Whatever farming's future may be, *Larding the Lean Earth* enlivens all that is behind our gaze today, and in the end Stoll's own gaze is longer than agriculture itself. He also maintains that although to our modern eyes the agricultural epoch represents longed-for stability, in terms of human life on earth it is barely any time at all. "Place the past three million years of primate evolution equal to a day," he notes, "and the age of agriculture begins at 4.8 minutes before midnight. Settled society is so new that we are still trying to understand its basic patterns, and it is not at all clear that fixed cultivation is as well adapted or will last as long as the methods of subsistence it replaced."

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Eros Unseated

THE LIVES OF THE MUSES: NINE WOMEN AND THE ARTISTS THEY INSPIRED

By Francine Prose.

HarperCollins. $25.95.

Reviewed by CRISTINA NEHRING

It's a rotten time to be writing about muses. Muses—those liminally visible women who inspire art—have not aged well in Western culture. Deified as goddesses in classical times, idolized as Beatrices and Lauras in the Renaissance, envied for half the last century as potent (albeit secular) sorceresses, they are dismissed today as sad relics of patriarchy. Muses are "passive and therefore passé," declared a 1996 *New Yorker* essay on the subject. A muse is a woman who should have been an artist but who settled for being the exploited *tool* of an artist—his unconscious handmaid. Or so the story goes, as Francine Prose (whose most recent novel concerns sexual harassment) is only too aware.

But it is not merely our evolving feminism that has sullied the notion of the muse; it is our fashionable anti-romanticism. We, today's ironic classes, have fallen out of love with love, and cringe to give it credit for the career of an artist. "We have," Prose declares in *The Lives of the Muses*, ". . . reached the point at which nearly anything—geography, ambition, expensive tastes, an abusive childhood, poverty—seems a more probable motivation for making art than the promptings of longing or love." And indeed, today's memoirs, as a *Washington Post* critic recently observed, are all about alcoholism and incest, racial tension and material privilege, quilt making and baseball: "My spreadsheet," she notes, "is more interesting for what it lacks. There are no memoirs of falling in love, marriages, weddings."

In our public estimation, eros has become too frail a thing to inspire either a self-respecting autobiography or an artistic awakening. Where once it was taken for granted that a single glimpse of one's beloved might engender a work as considerable—and as long in writing—as Dante's *Vita Nuova* or Petrarch's great sonnet sequence, the assumption today, in Prose's words, is "that the human psyche is too complex to derive something so tough and enduring as art from something so fragile and transitory as love."

Prose moves to unseat this easy cynicism. She documents—in rich detail—the course of nine amorous relationships and the art to which they gave rise. The complexity of the liaisons she describes—between Dalí and Gala, Nietzsche and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell, among others—suggests that there is no complexity in the human psyche that does not find its echo, and often its most intense incarnation, in a love affair. Her survey of Dalí's non-possessive adoration of the promiscuous Gala, Samuel Johnson's strangely self-abasing passion for Hester Thrale, Nietzsche and Paul Rée's chaste ménage-à-trois with Lou Andreas-Salomé, and Carroll's ecstatic obsession with seven-year-old Alice Liddell explodes the claustrophobic conceptions of love that reign today. "Our culture," Prose asserts,

> has too narrowly defined the parameters of what we call *love*, and drastically foreshortened the continuum along which each individual passionate affair or painfully repressed romance . . . each socially condoned or "inappropriate" attraction, is located. Instead of acknowledging that every love is different . . . we create reductive categories that fit no one and nothing. To call Charles Dodgson [a.k.a. Lewis Carroll] a "pedophile" [for example] is not only to misapprehend and diminish the nature of his relationship with Alice Liddell but to deny its complexity, its depth, and its essential singularity.

These are bold words—and, in the face of the Erotic Inquisition that rages in our midst—salutary words. To read Prose's biographical skits is to marvel at the number of creative and consensual relationships that

Cristina Nehring is a writer who teaches literature at UCLA and the Université de Paris XIII. Her essays have appeared in *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*.

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would, in our own day, be criminalized like Carroll's, medicated like Johnson's (for sexual aberration), or lamented like Nietzsche's (for sexual abstinence). For if earlier ages stigmatized various sexual behaviors, our own age pathologizes them. Take relations between under- and over-eighteen-year-olds, once essentially considered the norm (Carroll's conventional brother proposed to his wife when she was fourteen, he twenty-seven)—or those between professors and students. Or take abstinence. It is almost as damning in our day of "rights" in the bedroom and strident sexual health to admit to a long-term love relationship that contains *no* sex (such as the ones Lou Andreas-Salomé had with Nietzsche, Freud, Rée, and her own husband of forty-three years, and Johnson had with Hester Thrale) as it was in the past to admit to a fleeting rendezvous that contained too *much* sex (or the wrong kind). Our society prescribes orgasms as earlier societies policed infidelities. We legislate psychosexual "health" as vigilantly as our forebears legislated moral rectitude.

So what sorts of relationships do we find in this book? Certainly the temperaments on display vary widely: from the tension-addicted World War II photographer Lee Miller, model and muse to Man Ray, to the self-effacing Charis Weston, model and housewife to Edward Weston. There are strong personalities like Gala Dalí (without whom, by all accounts, her husband would have been both a nicer and a dramatically more impecunious person) and Lou Andreas-Salomé (who managed the cerebral heavyweights of her day like a puppeteer, charging them to dance round her in pairs and trios, surrender sex, and speak of God). There are paler characters like Elizabeth Siddal, the swooning model who waited almost until her deathbed to be wed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Alice Liddell, whose life's last high point really seems to have come when, at age eleven, she asked Carroll for a story.

Prose betrays an odd preference for the models among the muses, for the non-thinkers, one could almost say. Whether from an intellectual's suspicion of her own kind, or an impulse to champion the underdog, she lavishes admiration upon seemingly undistinguished muses like Siddal, turning an epistolary aside about a postal clerk Siddal calls "Mutton-chop" into evidence of superior wit and "trenchant observation," even while belittling genuine thinkers like Lou Andreas-Salomé, whose twenty published books she almost completely disregards. Perhaps the issue here is also temperamental: Prose seems to dislike Salomé's Germanic high-mindedness; her efforts to grasp God ("every real conversation is about God") strike the more secular writer as pompous and disingenuous. She mockingly traces her heroine's theology to an incident in her childhood "involving the melting of two snowmen." Though such an incident does occur in the memoirs, reducing Salomé's religious thought to snowmen is like reducing Newton's physics to apples.

Prose's narratives are vulnerable in other ways as well: her chronology is often hard to follow, and omissions slant our view of her protagonists. One gets the impression, for example, that Dalí's muse spent much of her relationship with him married to his fellow surrealist Paul Eluard. Prose tells us only that she wed Dalí in 1958, after Eluard's death. Without questioning Gala's promiscuity, one might note that she divorced Eluard in 1929 and, in 1935, legally married the man whose career she idolized. Only the church ceremony was deferred. As a Catholic who had consummated her marriage with Eluard (and would continue to have relations with him after joining Dalí), Gala could hardly have it annulled. For all her errors of lust and egotism, she clearly made Dalí's life better: after she died, his existence was distinguished by senility and arson. He was soon found malnourished in a burning bed, and he lingered in black depression until his own demise. All this goes unmentioned in Prose's narrative, which abruptly ends (unlike the others) with the death of the muse.

But these are small quibbles about a big book. Possibly a more significant issue is the absence not of particular details but of an overarching hypothesis or argument about her subject. For all Prose's astute local in-

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sights, her final destination seems a touch banal. What, finally, does she want us to recognize about muses? Well, as she says in her conclusion, there are "many kinds of muses," and they "respond differently to the dilemmas that have traditionally confronted women." If this is not arresting, neither is it persuasive. What strikes one when contemplating the liaisons Prose has sketched is not just endless diversity, but several troubling commonalities.

For one thing—as Prose herself half-admits—the relationships of her subjects were consistently turbulent, even when, like Gala and Dalí's union, they lasted a long time. They would seem to defy the sometime consensus that to produce great art you must have a degree of security and concentration, a place at the hearth in which to recollect emotions in tranquillity. Prose's test cases would suggest that tranquillity is the last thing that inspires art, though artists themselves may seek it. "People wish to be settled," said Ralph Waldo Emerson, but "only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." Prose points out that it was while mourning the loss of their beloveds that Nietzsche wrote *Zarathustra* and Man Ray took his best photographs. But simple abandonment is hardly the ideal form of unsettledness in a muse-artist relationship, and Prose's couples illustrate many other varieties. There is the provocation and argument that Salomé offered her suitors (more efficacious, one hopes, than the sexual abstinence; though it is perhaps worth noting that at least four of the nine relationships that Prose examines were unconsummated); the repeated courtship that Gala required of Dalí, and Suzanne Farrell of George Balanchine; the competition on which Yoko Ono and John Lennon thrived. The muses who fared the worst were those, like Charis Weston, who became their artist's doppelgänger and helpmeet: "Better be a nettle in the side of your friend," said Emerson elsewhere, "than his echo."

Is this conclusion cynical? Does it mean artists cannot bear very much happiness? Or could it mean simply that they cannot bear very many free rides? The most creative

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among us need to continue earning our keep, earning our muse, earning our happiness. When it is simply handed over, we cease to strive and seek; we cease to perform. Artists and lovers instinctively prefer relationships in which they continue to develop, not those in which they can rest on their laurels.

As for muses: Is it degrading to be one? Should muses be retired because they reinforce "unevolved, sexist myths"? Here Francine Prose is right on target: "A more generous solution," she asserts, "might be . . . to give men and women equal opportunity to be either artist or muse." And indeed, one must only think of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's adored husband, Emily Dickinson's obscure "Master," Margaret Fuller's idolized and upbraided Emerson, Edna St. Vincent Millay's revolving boy-toys, and even Sylvia Plath's alternately hated and loved Ted Hughes to know that men have stepped up to the plate. The sexual segregation of muse and artist is outdated. Parnassus, these days, is co-ed. Which does not mean it's any less stormy.

The Acute Angler

THE FISH'S EYE: ESSAYS ABOUT ANGLING AND THE OUTDOORS
By Ian Frazier.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $20.

Reviewed by FRANKLIN BURROUGHS

In a posthumously published story called "On Writing," Hemingway's Nick Adams thinks two categorical thoughts: that he loves fishing more than anything, and that writing is more fun than anything. People who do not fish might expect it to be the other way around.

Franklin Burroughs is the author of *Billy Watson's Croker Sack* and *The River Home*. He lives in Bowdoinham, Maine. His essay "Compression Wood" (Spring 1998) was selected for *The Best American Essays 1999*.

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Virginia Woolf, reviewing *A Summer on the Test*, by Major John Hills, M.P., found herself mystified:

> Now, if the art of writing consists in laying an egg in the reader's mind from which springs the thing itself—whether man or fish—and if this art requires such ardour in its practitioners that they will readily, like Flaubert, give up all their bright spring mornings to its pursuit, how comes it that Major Hills, who has spent thirty years in the House of Commons, can do the trick?"

Hills was a family friend; Woolf's diaries reveal that she considered him an interesting character, but no genius. Her review insinuates that the magic of fishing itself enables Hills to "do the trick"—that he was less a creator than a transcriber.

W. B. Yeats piddled around with a rod in the great fishing country of the Irish West just enough to sense a missed vocation, counterbalancing the one he had chosen. And so he imagined a kind of alternate self, a man who lived apart from all the ruckus of literature and politics, and whose craft was silent, austere, auroral, and self-sufficing. In "The Fisherman," this alter ego is the keeper of the poet's artistic conscience, demanding nothing less than a poem "cold and passionate as the dawn."

In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett describes a modest and unsuccessful expedition to a trout brook in the mid-coast region of Maine. She uses the clichés of nineteenth-century nature writing to convey the charms of fishing—standardized stuff about being so close to nature that one feels a piece of it, about dark pools and sunny shallows, about "the speaking, companionable noise of the water." And then there is an electric, vivifying phrase asserting "the amazing importance of what one is doing." I surmise that she, like Yeats, did not fish very often, but often enough for the writer in her to recognize its amazing importance and to announce it as a simple, self-evident truth.

And so angling, the non-professional use of lines and hooks and rods or poles (a pole is a rod without a reel) to catch fish, appears to be an innately literary pursuit. Something about fishing makes people want to write, while something about writing makes them want to go fishing. I know what I am talking about here, and there are more of me than you even want to think about.

The world's supply of books like Hills's *Summer on the Test* (a classic of piscatorial literature, by the way) is large. The flow has swollen to flood stage in the last thirty or forty years. But even as far back as 1944, in an essay titled "Reading and Fishing" in the July issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, we learn that Mr. Henry A. Sherwin, of Albany, New York, had a collection of angling books that ran to four thousand volumes. That represents a substantial tradition. It is one that has never received anything like the attention given to the pastoral tradition, although very few poets or critics have ever actually sheared a lamb or even wanted to.

The ultimate sources of the tradition are in classical antiquity, but Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler; or The Contemplative Man's Recreation* may be said to stand at the head of navigation, beyond which the stream is too skimpy for anyone but antiquaries and literary genealogists. In his ponderous way, Walton anticipated the best of the writers who were to follow in his footsteps. That is, he understood that fishing was both a literal and a metaphorical pursuit. On the one hand, he instructs you to leave a dead cat in the sun for a couple of days, then to bury it in soft earth free from frost, then to dig it up in a week or two. You will find you have a fine lot of gentles—maggots—which are excellent bait for any bottom-feeding fish. When you run out of cats, you can hang a cow's liver over a barrel of clay and get the same result. But he also loses no opportunity to remind us that angling is the pursuit of holy men, a solace to the soul, and an invitation to rejoice in the quieter glories of God's creation, seething cat carcasses, flyblown cow's livers, and all. He knows anglers are kin to poets. Both must be born with a "love and propensity to the art itself," and cannot be made by instruction alone.

Like Hemingway, John McPhee, William

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Humphrey, Norman Maclean, John Hersey, and Thomas McGuane, Ian Frazier is a writer who fishes, as opposed to Major John Hills, M.P., who was plainly a fisherman who wrote. (That side of the tradition is rich and contains much wonderful writing. Among contemporary practitioners, I would especially mention Nick Lyons, Chris Camuto, and Ted Leeson.) In his subject matter and his narrative persona, Frazier—a writer whose investigations of the contemporary American West (*Great Plains, On the Rez*) unpredictably combine genuine power and an engaging breeziness of manner—particularly resembles McPhee. That may have something to do with the fact that he, like McPhee, has a long-standing association with *The New Yorker*; most of the pieces in *The Fish's Eye* first appeared there.

In any event, Frazier, like McPhee or like Edward Hoagland, is a man who always stays in touch, psychologically speaking, with the fallen world, no matter how deeply he has gone into the natural one. The big granite slabs of the Ausable River, in upstate New York, remind him of the rocks where people sun in Central Park. In the eddies behind streamside boulders, we find driftwood, "along with spider webs and pine straw and pieces of broken picnic cooler lids and wads of fishing line." The stream of his consciousness carries its own kind of detritus—an odd name he can't get out of his mind, a refrain from a song of the 1960s or 1970s that buzzes in his brain maddeningly. He takes his own white noise with him. He often fishes in conspicuously unidyllic circumstances—beside a tire dealership or a golf course, or out behind an industrial gravel pit.

Frazier notes—very accurately—that angling has "a deep lonesome willfulness to it that just isn't sociable at all," and that "basically, your family and friends would prefer that you didn't do it." He admires the "angling holiness" of a man who drives a cab in Boston all winter so that he can go out west and live out of his car and fish all summer, but knows that it isn't for him. He will lead a normal life, even if it means fishing at night, after the kids have gone to bed, or early in the morning, before they go to school. He contrives to do this in both Missoula and Manhattan. Angling is not so much the contemplative man's recreation as it is the active man's afternoon off.

From bits and pieces of different essays, we learn where Frazier grew up, how he started fishing, and so forth. But his book is not one of those that could be subtitled "An Angler's Odyssey," or anything like that. He is an anecdotalist, not an autobiographer. The essays in the book appear in order of their composition. The earliest ones date from the late 1970s, when Frazier was living in New York City. At some point he relocated to Missoula, Montana; but he has recently moved back east, this time to New Jersey. This illustrates, on a larger scale, his inability to get away from it all, or at least to stay away as long as he would like.

By far the most sustained piece is "An Angler at Heart," his portrait of Jim Deren, proprietor of a tackle shop called The Angler's Roost on East Forty-third Street. It runs to thirty pages. The final essay, "Five Fish," looks to rival it, but in fact breaks down into five piscatorial vignettes, each of which could stand separately. Several of the other essays have a "Talk of the Town" flavor—brief, charming, consciously minor in an Addison-and-Steele-ish sort of way. Many are humorously thematic—about big versus small fish, about the clutter of outdoor gear brought indoors, about bad advice. Along with the portrait of Deren, "On the Ausable," "A Lovely Sort of Lower Purpose," and "Five Fish" seemed to me the most satisfying. Frazier can be wonderfully precise: a mayfly hatch makes the river "percolate with rising trout"; a water snake "zigzagged fast across the surface, in what looked like a shoelacing race."

In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams gets to the good place, where nothing can touch him, where he does not want to rush his sensations or in any way disturb the protocols of paradise. Frazier knows better than to try going back there. He has, after all, forsworn angling holiness, and is modestly content to add a small, good book to a distinguished and underrated tradition.

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Liberté, Egalité, Bloodshed

CITIZENS & CANNIBALS:
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, THE STRUGGLE FOR MODERNITY, AND THE ORIGINS OF IDEOLOGICAL TERROR
By Eli Sagan. Rowman and Littlefield. $35.

Reviewed by MICHAEL BURNS

Composed in the spring of 1792, as the French Revolution approached its fourth year and war with Austria loomed, "The Battle Song of the Army of the Rhine" aimed to lift spirits and rouse troops. Soon retitled in honor of the southern soldiers who made it popular, "La Marseillaise" promised a glorious day when France's new citizens would rise up to tear down tyranny's "bloodstained banner." Marching on in closed ranks, they would destroy foes out to "slaughter our sons, wives, and kin"; they would drench the fields of the fatherland with the enemy's "foul blood."

And so they did. But in those years before Napoleon drove the Revolution across Europe, the blood was more Gallic than foreign, and the enemies lurked within. Less than six months after Rouget de Lisle penned his battle hymn, Paris crowds stormed city prisons and massacred more than one thousand countrymen, including priests, women, children, common criminals, and loosely defined bands of counter-revolutionary suspects. They mutilated corpses and paraded heads on pikes, in an orgy of bloodletting that had a precedent in technique if not in scope. On July 14, 1789, the Bastille's governor had been hacked apart, as had a city magistrate, and the following fall, when market women forced the king and queen back to Paris from Versailles, the severed heads of royal bodyguards punctuated the procession. But the massacres of September 1792 were far bloodier than anything that had come before, and the deaths gave birth to a new term, which, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, carries a chilling ring: any person "capable of terrorist action," Eli Sagan reminds us, became known as a *Septembriseur.*

The slaughter was also the first symptom of what Alexis de Tocqueville would later call a "virus of a new and unknown kind." Ideological terror marked the Revolution's next and most radical phase, with the provincial lawyer and Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre seizing the revolution from the people in the people's name. At the helm of the Committee of Public Safety, "the great Incorruptible," in concert with the likes of Louis de Saint-Just ("the archangel of death"), expanded the list of internal enemies to include "not only traitors, but even those who are indifferent." The terror's machinery would punish "whoever is passive in the republic," Saint-Just warned, "and who does nothing for it." That "annihilation of the private," in Sagan's apposite phrase, like the call to sacrifice two hundred thousand heads in order to save one million, was a key ingredient in the recipe of ideological terror, and a legacy left to the totalitarian regimes of the modern world. A Russian monument makes the point: shortly after the Revolution of 1917, one of the first statues erected in honor of Robespierre went up in Moscow, in the Kremlin's shadow.

France's Reign of Terror, like its later counterparts, purged enemies with the most sophisticated technology of the time. Dr. Guillotine's enlightened and equitable invention promised a comparatively painless death, and delivered it to at least thousands of counter-revolutionaries, real and imagined. By the summer of 1794, as the Terror reached its final act, nearly five hundred thousand arrests had led to the execution (by various methods) of more than thirty-five thousand men and women, humble and grand: Chrétien de Malesherbes, royalist reformer and defender of French Protestants, went to the guillotine with his daughter and granddaughter in the

Michael Burns is Professor Emeritus of Modern European History at Mt. Holyoke College, and the author, most recently, of *France and the Dreyfus Affair: A Documentary History.*

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winter of 1793; Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry, met the same fate, alongside his father-in-law, the following spring. Robespierre's head finally fell in its turn, when former comrades had had enough; and the crowd, once his constituency, cheered his execution. The Revolution, like Saturn, had begun to devour its own children, Sagan tells us. The French gods of terror, one witness reported, could not slake their thirst.

How had it all come to pass in that roseate epoch of liberal dreams and natural, inalienable, and sacred rights? Edmund Burke may have seen savagery on the horizon of 1789, but most observers, in and out of France, sensed the opposite. The relatively peaceful gathering of the Estates-General, followed by the establishment of the National Assembly and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, prompted poets to imagine a golden sunrise, not a crimson nightmare. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," Wordsworth recalled, "But to be young was very heaven." From England a Liberal leader called the Revolution's first phase "much the greatest event . . . that ever happened in the world and how much the best." Benighted aristocrats and hidebound priests may have resisted reform, but for most of those who bothered with politics, the early quest for liberty and fraternity came with high hopes.

It did not come, however, with a consensus on the thorny question of equality, and that is Sagan's provocative point. "A basic mistrust of democratic equality," even among those who preached its virtues, ran like "a menacing fault line in this solid rock fundament" of liberal Revolution. To probe that paradox, to understand how a standard-bearer of equality like Robespierre could become a "cannibalistic terrorist," Sagan proposes the notion of "radical splitting." Racked by paranoia and in high anxiety over the modern world they had helped create, ideological terrorists suffered, as they would suffer across the centuries, a "severe psychopathology" characteristic of borderline personalities. The "struggle for Modernity," which the author links to the struggle to establish a "Stable Democratic Society" (he has a weakness for capitals throughout), carries with it an array of "psychological traps." That Robespierre was sick we may always have guessed; that he labored under a "Modernity Psychosis" we owe to *Citizens & Cannibals.*

Such language pervades this weighty mounting block of a book, a thought-provoking but often befuddling mélange of history, sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and personal rumination, parts of which would have profited from the editorial equivalent of the guillotine. One chapter title ("Paranoid Panic; Human Sacrifice as Paranoid Revenge; Scapegoats") speaks for others. Unlike those traditional "metanarrative" historians of the Revolution who paint vast, dramatic canvases, Sagan rolls out a spacious couch on which radical actors and suicidal fratricides are analyzed and diagnosed. For those with the patience to navigate the long sessions, as well as the cascade of redundancies and anachronistic asides (from President Clinton's "sexual peccadilloes" to the morality of the Kabaka of Buganda), Sagan offers a number of lucid insights. He is superb on the incapacity of French revolutionaries to conceive of a loyal opposition ("if all opponents were traitors, no democracy was possible"); on comparisons with America's revolutionary leaders (it is, in fact, telling that while Jefferson and Hamilton, keen enemies, agreed to disagree, Robespierre went for his rivals' jugular); on the "secular sacred" of Nationalism and the Revolution's two "great mistakes" (forcing the clergy's oath of allegiance and declaring war on Europe's great powers).

Eli Sagan has now written six books that aim to "pierce that veil [of] the psychological origins of human evil," but admits that he still cannot "really understand it." He can, however, chronicle its horrors, when the spirit moves and the jargon ebbs. *Citizens & Cannibals* seizes our imagination, not with sociological theories and psychoanalytic attempts to divine the wellsprings of human iniquity, but with compelling descriptions of pernicious edicts, fanatical leaders, and innocents massacred on altars of Ideological Truth.

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The Aesthetic Imperative

THOMAS MANN: LIFE AS A WORK OF ART
By Hermann Kurzke; translated from the German by Leslie Willson.
Princeton University Press. $35.

Reviewed by ADAM KIRSCH

"I was forced to look within myself for everything. If I wanted true source material, feeling, or reflection for my poems, I had to delve into my own bosom. . . . Therefore all my published works are but fragments of one great confession." Substitute "novels" for "poems," and the famous lines by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe could easily have come from the pen of Thomas Mann. Mann, who deliberately patterned his career after Goethe's, was in nothing more Goethean than in his artistic egotism, his belief that his own experience had universal validity and importance. But as Mann wrote in his essay "Goethe's Career as a Man of Letters," this sort of egotism is the opposite of ordinary selfishness:

> "True symbolism," says Goethe, "lies where the particular represents the general." This is precisely the symbolism of the poetic ego, which needs only to express itself fully to loosen the tongue of the multitude. . . . The goodwill which is a part of the work of art is essentially important in this sense of being representative, of unwillingly and unwittingly standing for the many—and this though the personal destiny, the inner life, may be far from that of the many, far from average or normal.

Egotism and goodwill, representativeness and abnormality: even in so short a space, we can see how the art of Thomas Mann is founded on doubleness and the ironic attraction of opposites. It is no coincidence that his characters usually come in antagonistic pairs: Tonio Kröger and Hans Hansen in *Tonio Kröger*, Settembrini and Naphtha in *The Magic Mountain*, Serenus Zeitblom and Adrian Leverkühn in *Doctor Faustus*. And in book after book, Mann's great theme is the fundamental opposition named in the subtitle of Hermann Kurzke's insightful biography: life and art.

Actually, Kurzke's book is less a straightforward biography than a study of the ways in which Mann translated his experiences into fiction. While it encompasses his whole life, it is not consecutive or complete; for purposes of information, Ronald Hayman's excellent *Thomas Mann* is a better choice. (The awkwardness and frequent obscurity of the translation, which takes the book out of German without quite putting it into English, is a further obstacle to its usefulness.) Kurzke proceeds, instead, by a series of mini-essays, each focused on an event or element of Mann's life. He demonstrates intelligent sympathy for his subject and a necessary awareness of the dangers of his method. For he is, in an important sense, unwriting Mann's lifework, making explicit and biographical what Mann encoded and universalized. At times this results in dismaying simplification, as when Kurzke summarizes the plot of *Doctor Faustus*: "Rudi Schwerdtfeger (Paul Ehrenberg), who is loved by Ines Institoris (Thomas Mann) . . . " But Kurzke also knows that "a great work is more than just a result of its biographical sources," and his sensitive interpretations go a long way toward convincing us that "knowledge of sources does not necessarily alienate, rather also makes it possible for emotion and compassion to intensify."

As Kurzke shows, Mann's use of such sources was extensive and direct: he based characters on people he knew, and assigned the events of his own life to his protagonists. The proportion of fact in his fiction varies—*Buddenbrooks* retells the history of the Mann family with great fidelity, while *The Magic Mountain* takes his schoolboy crush on a male classmate and transforms it into a heterosexual passion. But in no case did Mann feel that it was a failure to report rather than in-

Adam Kirsch's first book of poems, *The Thousand Wells*, is due out this fall from Ivan R. Dee. His essay "Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot" appeared in the SCHOLAR's Summer 1998 issue.

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vent. Rather, he writes, "criticism of what is real . . . is the very thing I felt as art."

At times, this approach caused serious trouble. Just after his marraige to Katia Pringsheim in 1905, he depicted her assimilated Jewish family in a painful story, "The Blood of the Walsungs," which makes use of anti-Semitic tropes. In the tale, the Aarenhold twins, Sieglinde and Siegmund, have an incestuous relationship, which is threatened by Sieglinde's engagement to a Christian suitor. At the end, the siblings consummate their love sexually; and the last line of the story as originally written has Siegmund gloating: "We've swindled him, the goy!" This was going too far, and Mann submitted to his wife's wish that he withdraw the story from publication; it did not appear until fifteen years later, in a limited edition. But he did not feel that this capitulation was an honorable one: "I cannot rid myself of a feeling of a lack of freedom, which in hypochrondriac hours is very depressing." In its extreme form, this artistic egotism viewed other people solely as material, denying them any right to an independent existence. When he heard of the death of a childhood friend, Otto Grautoff, Mann wrote: "I cannot but feel that he belonged only to my life and then wanted to be something himself, foolishly."

Humanly this seems cold, and indeed Thomas Mann was cold, reserved, with few intimates. But it is finally vindicated, by the same paradox that Mann invoked in the Goethe essay. For the writer to make fiction out of his own life may seem selfish, but it is actually philanthropic. Mann earns the right to make use of the Grautoffs and Pringsheims because he uses himself far more relentlessly, and because all of posterity benefits from the sacrifice.

But "life as a work of art" becomes more problematic when it enters the realm of politics. When the First World War erupted in 1914, Mann supported Germany's aggression with more than mere patriotism—it became for him a moral and aesthetic passion. He was further inflamed when his older brother Heinrich became a vocal opponent of Germany, writing a powerful essay in which the

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FOR THE FIRST TIME, PERHAPS, A TENABLE HISTORY OF JESUS

It won't be found in the Bible. Critical examination of the New Testament Gospels reveals sloppy history, perhaps deliberately deceptive, giving a picture of Jesus more imaginative than factual. Frankly, most Christians seem not to notice or care–transcendentalism spins its own reality. But true realists, for whom accurate history matters, may be pleased with what the recently discovered *Gospel of Thomas* provides: 113 notes taken down by Thomas of perplexing things Jesus said. Such notes were probably made at the time they were heard and have not suffered alteration--the best kind of source for a history.

Jack Hannah in ***You Will Not Taste Death: Jesus and Epicureanism*** recognizes the notes as chronologically ordered and correlative with the skeletal history used in the *Gospel of Mark*. Hannah provides all the text of *Thomas* with comments and Marcan context, thereby developing a narrative of Jesus that is tenably historical.

This ***historical*** Jesus based his teaching on the Epicurean philosophy; e.g. in place of Judaism's practices of fasting, praying, almsgiving, and obeying food laws, this ***historical*** Jesus substituted: "Tell no lie and never do what you hate." This ***historical*** Jesus never mentioned a devil, demons, or hell. Epicureanism also shaped Jesus' opinion that God and Caesar are man-made authorities and that one's ultimate authority should be oneself.

Hannah's book is 321 pgs., pbk., $12 postpaid.
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example of Emile Zola was used to reproach intellectuals, like Thomas, who abetted an unjust chauvinism.

The literary fruit of this controversy was *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, a tortuous book in which Thomas Mann defends his position and attacks his brother, who is mockingly disguised as "Civilization's Literary Man." This book, little read in America and (like a scandalous amount of Mann's work) currently out of print, offers remarkable insight into Mann's imagination, for it shows him applying the very techniques of his fiction to real historical events. Any reader of *The Magic Mountain* knows the seductive power of Mann's symbolism, the way he infuses concrete events and details with abstract significance. Hans Castorp's cigars, Claudia Chavchat's slamming of doors, a chest X-ray, a lecture on Freudian psychology, a séance, a sexual encounter on Carnival night: all these are links in a chain of symbols connecting eros, art, and death. As Kurzke writes, "Nothing escapes this gaze that puts the world in order; everything affirms something or other and negates something else."

Yet in *Reflections*, this same gaze is turned on the objective political world, with troubling results. The book is a staged combat between groups of symbols: Heinrich Mann, Romain Rolland, France, democracy, civilization, and literature are set against Thomas Mann, Frederick the Great, Germany, eros, irony, and music. It is a brilliant and seductive performance, but it never comes to grips with the concrete facts of the war, its immediate causes and consequences, and its horrible cost. We miss the awareness of tragic waste with which most English writers addressed the subject. With hindsight, we must agree with Heinrich's unsent letter of January 1918, that Thomas's wartime writings display an "arrant disrespect for things not adequate for you, a 'contempt' that is frivolous like no other, in short, the inability ever to understand the real seriousness of an unfamiliar life." "I'm not the man to tailor misery and the death of peoples to the favorite diversions of my mind," Heinrich wrote; but at least in 1918, Thomas was.

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As Kurzke points out, many German intellectuals who held views similar to Mann's at the end of World War I ended up as Nazi sympathizers. Yet Mann, in his most impressive act of self-overcoming, refused this path; instead, he became one of the most vocal defenders of the Weimar Republic, and a prescient opponent of Hitler. That this meant abandoning some of the core principles of *Reflections* Mann was reluctant to admit, but in practice he saw that the only alternatives for Germany were democracy or fascist barbarism. Shortly after Hitler's election as chancellor in 1933, Mann left the country on a brief lecture tour, and the news that reached him from home made it clear that barbarism had won. A major enemy of the regime, he would not return to Germany for nearly twenty years. Switzerland and then California gave him sanctuary, but his link to his German audience, which had fueled his work for more than thirty years, was severed.

Appropriately, Mann saw this turn of events less as a personal injury than as an aesthetic error. He had always been a consciously, deliberately German writer, and the Nobel Prize in 1929 had consolidated his position as a national figure. "That I have been forced out of this existence," he wrote in 1933, "is a heavy stylistic lapse and error of destiny in my life." This might seem an understatement; to many writers, it would have been a shattering, career-ending tragedy. But Mann had the courage and self-assurance not just to keep writing but to produce, in *Doctor Faustus*, a penetrating analysis of the Nazi evil. Politics, which had once caused the moral failure of his art, became the scene of its most moving triumph. For it was Thomas Mann's artistic egotism, his sense of life as a work of art, that enabled him to say, in the dark exile of 1938: "Wherever I am, Germany is." As posterity gratefully acknowledges, he was right.

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THE READER REPLIES

PROS AND CONS

In a negative world, there must be a few positive notes. THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR is one of them. I started subscribing three years ago after becoming completely disenchanted with most available magazines. Since then, I've known it's time for the next issue when I say to my husband, "I *need* something challenging to *read*!" When the SCHOLAR comes, I make a pot of tea and settle down for a long, long read. I mark my way through the pages, giving my favorite articles four stars to signal rereading at a later date. As a writer myself, I appreciate your high standards. I also appreciate your format, which is uncluttered, straightforward, and clear: a relief to the eyes after the carnival layouts one finds elsewhere.

BARBARA R. SANDS
Tewksbury, Massachusetts

I do not intend to renew, as THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR seems to have become more a literary magazine than one devoted to serious philosophical, religious, social, and political issues.

JOHN H. WARE, JR.
Scarborough, Maine

There was much to enjoy in your "World's Eye" issue (Summer 2002): Ian Frazier on John Reed's Russia, Peter Chilson on the Sahara, Mario Vargas Llosa on Bob Marley, Geoffrey Wawro on Iran, and Steven G. Kellman on Bulgaria, among others. As Emerson once wrote: "The wise man wonders at the usual." And this is pretty much the concern of the writers in the SCHOLAR'S international issue.

ROBERT BURLINGAME
Salt Flat, Texas

LIFE IN THE MARGINS

My chagrin was heartfelt when I read in Professor Kellman's "Life in the Margins" that "in Bulgaria, nodding one's head means no; shaking it means yes."

For years, my favorite trivia question (second only to: "In baseball, if there are nine men on a team, two teams playing, three strikes to an out, three outs to an inning, four balls to a walk, nine innings in a game, what is there eight of?") was: "Why do humans nod their heads for yes, and shake their heads for no?"

My answer has always been that the mouth was being moved by the head, indicating acceptance or rejection of nourishment. This response was wired in when the infant fed at the breast. Reaching for the nipple required raising the head; succor accomplished or rejected would tend to turn the head aside. Very simple.

Now I am faced with a real problem. I cannot cite Bulgarian behavior without a suitable explanation that will support my thesis. Why *do* the Bulgarians engage in this anomalous behavior?

MEL RECHTMAN
Decatur, Georgia

Steven G. Kellman responds: A mere nodding acquaintance with Bulgarian head signals might shake belief in body English as a universal non-verbal language. Even Homer nods, but when a Greek—or a Romanian, Turk, Greek, Serb, or any of Bulgaria's other sometimes hostile neighbors—moves the noggin vertically, it indicates assent. Not so for a Bulgarian, who affirms with a shake, negates with a nod. To an outsider, such sig-

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nals seem so prominent in ordinary communication that putting a paper bag over a Bulgarian's head would have the same muting effect as handcuffing an Italian. Through centuries of invasion and subjugation, Bulgarians' semiotic perversity was a way to maintain national identity, by concurring with the conqueror while privately dissenting. But I bow to any scholar with a more compelling explanation.

SCATOLOGICAL MEDICINE

Sherwin B. Nuland's "Scatological Medicine" reminds us that, just as infallibility in faith and morals may make the Pope particularly fallible about everything else, so the practice of medicine is not made godlike by scientific methodology. Some aspects of contemporary medical practice will eventually become part of medicine's long history of horrors. The "uncertain art" remains subject to all the faults of human nature because physicians are ruled, like the rest of us, by such things as economic, social, cultural, and psychological strictures upon their knowledge and thought.

Today's patient is usually like a person at the amusement park who goes for a ride on the roller coaster, only to be told at the end, "Stay right where you are; you're on this ride for the rest of your life." Preventive medicine can be justified on many grounds. But the savvy patient does not want a relationship with his doctors; in many cases, he wants and needs only to be given some help in allowing nature to make him well.

Of the art and practice of medicine, let it be said, as it should be of everything human, *Caveat emptor.*

ARTHUR H. KING
Audubon, New Jersey

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The Podium

Keats the Surgeon

JEAN HAYNES

Because he lost both his parents by the time he was fifteen, John Keats had to make his own way in the world. Apprenticed to a local surgeon-apothecary, he shelved the medicine jars, made the bandages, rolled the pills, polished the knives and scarifiers, and fed the leeches.

In 1815, just before his twentieth birthday, Keats registered at Guy's Hospital in London for surgical training. He was soon noticed by the great surgeon Astley Cooper, who had him appointed as a "dresser"—a medical student who assisted during operations in the hospital's skylit theatre, a hot, crowded room that echoed with the hubbub of the audience and the screams of the patient. During his months at Guy's, Keats learned the parts of the body—nerve, bone, sinew, and muscle—by dissecting cadavers provided by body snatchers who had robbed churchyards of their corpses.

While he walked the wards, Keats was developing the compassion, the sensitivity, and the powers of observation that would be found later in his poetry. He noted the benefits of sleep ("full of sweet dreams, and health and quiet breathing") and fresh air ("The breezes were ethereal and pure / And crept through half-closed lattices to cure / The languid sick"). Although he wrote that "there is a great pleasure in alleviating suffering," he felt his true vocation was as a poet: poetry was a medicine for the mind, while surgery was "a dreadful profession in having to witness so much pain of others." Nevertheless, he easily passed his qualifying examinations.

That autumn, Keats turned twenty-one and was no longer answerable to his guardian. He had his qualification to fall back on if he failed, so he announced that he did not intend to practice surgery.

"What do you intend to be?" demanded his guardian.

"I mean to rely on my ability as a poet."

"John," said his guardian, "you are either mad or a fool."

—from a talk delivered on June 2, 2002, at The Old Operating Theatre Museum, London

Jean Haynes is a literary historian. She is a guide with London Walks and a member of the Committee of Friends of Keats House.

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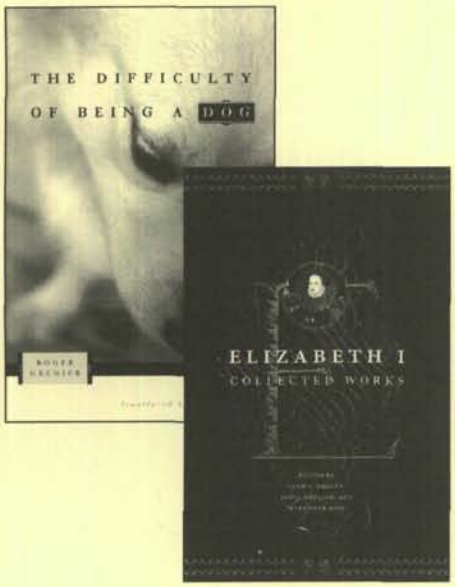

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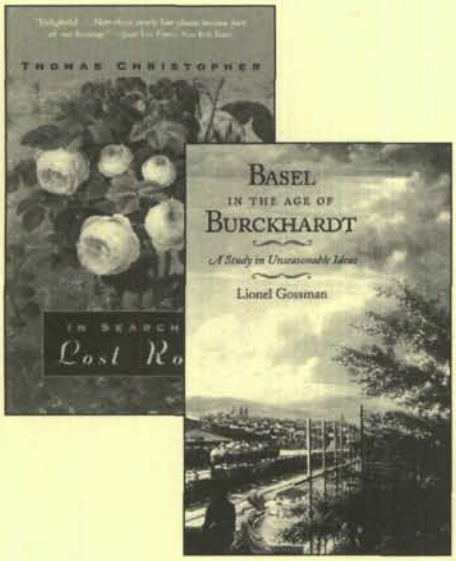

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